CORONET

THE TASTE OF FEAR

Edited by

HUGH LAMB

A HORROR ANTHOLOGY

THE TASTE OF FEAR

With fiendish chuckles he retired into the shadows and, lifting something from the ground, brought it into the light. It was an iron cage containing six large rats.
'They are hungry,' he said, 'very hungry. I have promised them a nice succulent morsel with warm red blood for gravy.'
Taking William's right hand he carefully raised the lid of the cage and then pushed the hand inside. For a moment the terrified and starving rodents scampered about and then they began to nibble. The madman, with inflamed eyes, watched the blood start to trickle through the bars. As the hand became raw and lacerated by the sharp teeth his hideous laughter filled the vault and he held the lantern high so that he could better witness his half-brother's silent agony . . .

Also by the same author, and available in Coronet Books:

A Wave of Fear
Victorian Tales of Terror
Terror by Gaslight

The Taste of Fear

Edited by

Hugh Lamb

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder and Stoughton

Copyright © 1976 by Hugh Lamb

First published in Great Britain 1976
by W. H. Allen Limited

Coronet edition 1977

The characters and situations in this book are entirely imaginary and bear no relation to any real person or actual happening

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which this is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Printed and bound in Great Britain for
Hodder and Stoughton Paperbacks, a
division of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.
Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks,
Kent (Editorial Office: 47 Bedford Square,
London, WC1 3DP) by
C. Nicholls & Company Ltd,
The Philips Park Press, Manchester

ISBN 0 340 22005 8

For Marie

Contents

EDITOR'S FOREWORD		11
THREE SHALL MEET	Frederick Cowles	13
THE FETCH	David Sutton	24
MANFRED'S THREE WISHES	H. F. W. Tatham	33
FROM THE TIDELESS SEA	William Hope Hodgson	40
BENJAMIN'S SHADOW	Michael Sims	83
THE FINAL TRICK	John Blackburn	96
THE QUEEN OF BEAUTY	E. H. Visiak	103
THE UTTERMOST FARTHING	A. C. Benson	119
ASH	Ramsey Campbell	175
THE HOUSE OF VENGEANCE	L. T. C. Rolt	186
LATE	Les Freeman	198
THE CRAB SPIDER	Erckmann-Chatrian	210
INTERIM REPORT	Roger Parkes	224

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements for permission to use copyright material are due to the following : Mrs Doris M. Cowles, for 'Three Shall Meet' by Frederick Cowles; David Sutton for 'The Fetch'; Michael Sims for 'Benjamin's Shadow'; John Blackburn for 'The Final Trick'; Bolt and Watson Ltd for 'The Queen of Beauty' by E. H. Visiak; Ramsey Campbell for 'Ash'; Mrs Sonia Rolt for 'The House of Vengeance' by the late L. T. C. Rolt; Les Freeman for 'Late' and Roger Parkes for 'Interim Report'.

Foreword

The Taste of Fear is something of a departure from the anthologies I have edited in the past. Previously I have concentrated on stories from forgotten authors, or forgotten stories from famous authors—but all being usually reprinted. Of the thirteen stories in this book, however, only four have ever been published before (though all have been out of print for fifty years or more and one has never before been published in English in this country); the other nine are completely new and have never been published elsewhere. One of them is seeing publication over a quarter of a century after it was written, thus proving that even new stories can be forgotten.

As always, I have tried to find as many new or neglected writers as possible. Of the neglected writers, H. F. W. Tatham here makes his first appearance in such an anthology after being forgotten for over sixty years. And two other authors, Les Freeman and Michael Sims, make their first appearance in a work of fiction in the following pages.

The four reprinted tales are by Erckmann-Chatrian, A. C. Benson, William Hope Hodgson and H. F. W. Tatham. The Erckmann-Chatrian tale 'The Crab Spider' (which, for the benefit of bibliophiles, was published in America under the title 'Waters of Death') is here making what I believe must be its first appearance in this country in English. It is a story that has taken me many years to find and I only hope you share the pleasure it has given me to get it back into print at last. A. C. Benson's tale is the second I have used of two that were discovered after his death by his brother E. F. Benson. It is the longest story in the book and 'The Uttermost Farthing', naturally, has some of the greatest terror. 'From The Tideless Sea' is a surprisingly neglected story by William Hope Hodgson, himself sadly underrated and until recently almost forgotten. His tale is one of the best of the collection. H. F. W. Tatham's story 'Manfred's Three Wishes is a splendid

discovery; Tatham was an Eton schoolmaster who wrote his ghost stories for much the same reasons as M. R. James.

There is also a new story, written over twenty-five years ago. by Frederick Cowles, which itself is part of a complete book of short stories that has remained forgotten and unpublished for the same length of time.

Two stories are of special interest: 'The Queen of Beauty', one of the last works of E. H. Visiak, and 'The House of Vengeance', the last story ever written by L. T. C. Rolt. Both are here being published for the very first time.

For the rest, there are some of the biggest names in horror today, all with new stories, including Ramsey Campbell, John Blackburn and David Sutton. And to round off the anthology, probably the grimmest story you'll see in a long while, by Roger Parkes, a past editor of the TV series *Out of the Unknown*.

I hope the relative change of emphasis from old to new stories will not alter the quality of the contents as far as readers are concerned; I have done my best to make sure it doesn't. Either way, I can promise you an interesting time comparing the style of today's masters with that of yesterday's.

My grateful thanks are extended to all those who helped with the compiling of this anthology; first and foremost, to those authors who supplied me with new stories and other material.

Especial thanks are due to Mrs Doris M. Cowles, who lent me the manuscript of *Fear Walks the Night*; to Mrs Helen Beere for supplying the manuscript and invaluable background information for 'The Queen of Beauty' by E. H. Visiak; and to Eithne Fearnley-Whittingstall for her speedy and excellent work on 'The Crab Spider'.

And, of course, grateful thanks and affection to my nearest of kin, who patiently bear my unbearable presence when I am hard at work among the ghouls and demons, and who are ever ready to encourage. I won't say it wouldn't have been *possible* without you all—but it would certainly have been less enjoyable and of decidedly inferior quality.

HUGH LAMB
Sutton, Surrey.

Three Shall Meet

by

FREDERICK COWLES

There could be no better start to this anthology of forgotten or unpublished tales than 'Three Shall Meet' for, uniquely, it is both forgotten and unpublished.

Frederick Cowles (1900-1948) was a widely travelled writer who specialized in English and Continental travel and folklore. He collected old tales of ghosts, witches and fairies and used many of them in his excellent ghost stories. However, he had a collector's respect for his subject. 'Where there is a legend to tell I have told it without comment, for I believe that the writer who seeks to explain away some old romance is guilty of the worst form of iconoclasm.'

Cowles published two books of ghost stories in the 1930s, which were sadly soon forgotten. Even more regrettable was the fact that shortly before he died, Cowles completed a third volume of macabre tales called Fear Walks the Night *which was never even published: regrettable because in many ways it was superior to his first two books.*

'Three Shall Meet' is one of the stories from Frederick Cowles' unpublished volume and this is its first appearance in print since it was written, over a quarter of a century ago.

On a dismal December afternoon in the year 1765 a lone horseman rode across Boulderstone Moor in the gathering dusk. A light sprinkling of snow clung to the stunted thorns and almost obliterated the narrow track. The rider was evidently familiar with the district, for there was no hesitation about his progress as he left the path and climbed a gentle rise. When he gained the summit the main road stretched before him and he drew

rein where a gibbet, with its burden of chains and bones, creaked in the wind. He hardly glanced at the gallows, but looked ahead to where, in the sheltered valley, the lights of a village gleamed through the mist. With a sigh of satisfaction he spurred his horse onwards and did not stop again until he had rattled down a cobbled street and the sign of *The Bells of Boulderstone* swung above his head. At the inn door he alighted, fastened his horse to a hook by the porch, and entered the hostelry.

John Skinner, the landlord, hastening forward to welcome the guest, stopped in agitated surprise with his eyes goggling. 'God bless my soul!' he exclaimed. 'If it isn't Master William. Whatever brings you back to Boulderstone, sir?'

'You may well ask that, my worthy John,' was the cheery response. 'Return of the prodigal I suppose. The best welcome you can offer is a pint of your mulled claret and I'm more than ready for it. It's plaguey cold outside, or else I grow soft with easy living. Make it two pints, my friend, and you shall keep me company and tell me all the news.'

The host, still mumbling expressions of polite surprise, flung open the door of a small parlour and bowed the stranger to a seat by the blazing fire. Then, with a word of excuse, he hurried away to fetch the drink. Left to himself William Maskell cast his hat and cloak aside and settled down in the saddlebag chair. He chose a pipe from the rack near to his hand, helped himself from the tobacco jar, and stretched his legs before the crackling logs. He was puffing away contentedly when Skinner returned with the steaming wine.

'Good for you, John,' the traveller cried. 'This tobacco is much better than any I can get in London and I'm sure the claret is as good as any ever shipped out of France and landed, under cover of darkness, in Twiston Cove. I'll wager King George never had a penny duty on either, and that makes them all the sweeter.'

The landlord gave a wheezy laugh. 'You haven't changed a bit, Master William. You always did like your little bit of fun.'

'Draw up, John, and we'll pledge one another whilst you tell me what is going on up at the Grange.'

A shadow crossed the landlord's jovial face, but he gratefully lowered his fat body into the seat on the opposite side of the hearth.

'Alas, Master William,' he said with some hesitation. 'There's nothing good I can say about your brother.'

'My half-brother you mean,' corrected his guest. 'God forbid that the kinship should be any closer than need be. I doubt if anyone could say anything good of him. He always was the most hated man in the county and I'm certain that time hasn't mellowed him. Heaven alone knows what he wants with me. It's ten years since I left the ancestral home and I never thought to cross his threshold again.'

'Did Sir Ambrose send for you, Master William?'

'Aye, that he did. A message of honied words has brought me from the city, and I already misdoubt me of its sweetness. My dear half-brother wrote that he was weakened by sickness and there were things that must be settled before he could die in peace. Reconciliation is a noble thing—so we are told by the preachers. But, knowing Ambrose, I am sure he will want something in return for a rathered withered olive branch.'

The old landlord's voice quavered a little as he replied. 'He's an evil man to cross and not one to forgive an injury. There do be many who say he is quite mad since you ran off with the Lady Madeline. Pardon me for mentioning the matter, Master William.'

William Maskell was silent for a few moments and, when he answered, the laughter had gone out of his voice. 'There's no reason why you shouldn't speak of it, John. Madeline has been dead these seven years, but we had three years of great happiness together. I bet that, when we went away together, that little bit of gossip lasted the village twelve months or more and, even then, the good people never got the rights of it.'

'Tales were told,' admitted his host. 'But everyone in the village was on your side, Master William. Some said that Sir Ambrose wanted the lady for himself.'

'That was quite true. He did. But can you, or any other sensible person, imagine Lady Madeline accepting Ambrose as a suitor for her hand? Fortunately she showed herself a woman of taste, albeit lacking in ambition, when she honoured me with

her trust and affection. It was perhaps a little unfortunate that we were forced to leave the Grange rather hurriedly and that my parting gift to my half-brother was a blow between the eyes. But these things do happen, my worthy friend, even in the best regulated families—and ours was never well regulated. Ambrose, I regret to say, was always a nasty piece of work. I presume he is still as parsimonious as ever and does little entertaining at the Grange?'

'Entertaining!' echoed John Skinner with contempt in his voice. 'Never a friendly foot has entered that house since you went away. Old Janet, the housekeeper, died six years ago come Candlemas and, since then, Sir Ambrose has lived there alone with only that dumb fellow, Simon Drew, to look after him. As I have often said to my good lady, the house must be a right pig-sty and as full of rats as a ripe Stilton is full of mites.'

'It always was a rat-infested warren,' was the laughing rejoinder. 'I can tell you that I don't relish having to spend even one night there and you may yet see me back again to claim a warm bed in your best chamber.' Draining his glass he jumped to his feet and flung his cloak around his shoulders. 'Now I must be going. I promise you that, if the hospitality of the Grange is not all I consider it should be, I shall be knocking at your door before midnight.'

The landlord accompanied his guest to the door with loud assurances that the resources of *The Bells* were his for the asking. As Maskell mounted his horse John Skinner laid a hand upon his arm and whispered, 'Be careful, Master William. Yon half-brother of thine is a man who does not forget a grudge, and I mistrust this invitation.'

William Maskell doubled his fist in a significant gesture and, with a smile on his lips, rode into the night.

Boulderstone Grange looked strangely forbidding in the light of the moon. The moat, which encircled the ancient building, gleamed with a sinister phosphorescence and its dank stench hung on the frosty air.

William rode across the stone bridge and, dismounting at

the gate, pulled at a rusty chain which set a bell clanging in the distance. Almost immediately slouching footsteps echoed on the cobbles and the stout door swung on its hinges. The man who came forward with a lantern in his hand was a misshapen dwarf. Making unintelligible noises he took the horse's bridle and led it through the gate, at the same time motioning the visitor to enter the house by a doorway on the other side of the courtyard. Maskell realized that this humpbacked creature must be the mute to whom Skinner had referred and, resigning his horse to the servant's charge, he made his way into the mansion. Before him stretched a long corridor from which branched a passage which he remembered led to the domestic quarters. A feeble lamp illuminated the entrance, but a stronger light came from a half-opened door at the end of the corridor. He went towards this, knocked on the panels, and entered a spacious room in which half-a-dozen candles burned in tarnished silver sconces. A dull log fire flickered feebly in the hearth and by it sat Sir Ambrose Maskell. In spite of his recumbent attitude he was obviously a man well beyond normal size. A dark beard, streaked with grey, partly concealed a cruel mouth and his hairy hands, spread on the arms of the chair, indicated great strength. As his half-brother entered the room his eyes glittered with triumph, but he made no attempt to rise in welcome.

'So you have come, William,' he said, and his voice was curiously thin and reedy for a man of his size.

'Yes, I have come,' responded the younger man, 'although I fail to see what you can want with me after so many years.' He removed his hat and cloak and flung them on to a carved chest.

'You will understand in good time,' replied the piping voice. 'I intend, however, that we shall leave business until the morning and devote this evening to such modest conviviality as shall be fitting for our reunion. But for Simon Drew I live quite alone, and it is long since I had a visitor to cheer me.'

'That is your own fault,' said William brusquely. 'You don't look very sick and I should not like to think I had been brought here under false pretences.'

'Don't be deceived by appearances,' Sir Ambrose purred. 'I am sick of an ailment for which there is no cure. I was loath

to die leaving so much unsettled between us.'

'I was hoping that our business could be transacted this evening and then I could return to the inn without inflicting my presence upon you for longer than is necessary,' replied the other.

'The inn, my good fellow,' protested Sir Ambrose. 'It would be a poor reflection upon my hospitality if I allowed my father's son to lodge in the village hostelry when he visits his home for the first time in ten years. Yes, William, it is ten years since we parted in anger—ten years to this very day, the tenth of December.'

'Why so it is,' agreed his half-brother with a start of surprise. 'I am not so observant of anniversaries as you appear to be.'

Sir Ambrose chuckled softly but there was no humour in his laugh. 'You forget, but I remember. It is fitting that we should be reconciled on the tenth anniversary of our quarrel. See, my head still bears the mark of that blow. Your ring cut into my flesh and the scar remains.' He turned his face to the light and showed a thin white mark on his dark brow. 'I wonder if it was worth it, William? According to all accounts your time with the lady was very short.'

'We won't talk of Madeline,' said William. 'Enough that I had three years of happiness with her as my wife. It would befoul her name if it should pass your lips.'

An uncomfortable situation was saved by the entrance of the servant who proceeded to set the table for a meal. William seated himself near the fire and watched the strange dwarf bring dishes and glasses, plates and cutlery from a large press. Soon the repast was ready and, heaving himself from his chair, Sir Ambrose led the way to the table.

The fare, although plain, was good and plentiful and an assortment of bottles on a side-table indicated that the squire of Boulderstone intended to offer reasonable entertainment. Hardly a word was exchanged as the meal proceeded and the uncouth servitor attended to their wants. William occasionally glanced at his host and, with some uneasiness, became aware of the fact that Sir Ambrose was labouring under an excitement which he strove to suppress. Although the elder man made some pretence of eating and drinking, it was obvious that he

had no appetite and his hands trembled as though with ague. When the meal was over he rose unceremoniously and led the way back to the fireside. Simon Drew removed the dishes, placed pipes, tobacco and glasses to hand, and left the half-brothers alone.

William did not settle immediately. He stood before the fire for a few moments and then wandered round the room inspecting the portraits on the walls. Pausing before the picture of a dark-visaged man, dressed in a costume of the time of the Commonwealth, he remarked, 'Our great-grandfather was a villainous-looking individual. No wonder the people said he was mad or even worse.'

'They say the same about me, I believe,' replied Sir Ambrose. 'But madness is akin to genius, and Clifford Maskell was a clever man.'

'Isn't he the one who is supposed to have constructed a secret room, the location of which is known only to the head of the family?'

His half-brother gave him a keen glance beneath his beetling brows. 'All sorts of tales are told of him,' he said. 'There are some to assert that he sold his soul to the devil and, in return, gained wealth and honour under the Protectorate. The family legend is that, at the end of his days, he was carried off by Old Nick. The only certain thing is that his body doesn't rest in the Maskell vault in Boulderstone church.'

William returned to the fire and settled himself in a low chair. 'I remember when we were boys we used to search for that secret room. I suppose, if there is such a place, our father revealed it to you, Ambrose, and you now know all that it conceals. But perhaps it isn't fair to ask. I seem to recall that the threshold must only be crossed by one person at a time, and he the head of the family. Probably there is no such room and it was just a tale told to frighten us youngsters. What was the doggerel old Janet used to repeat to us?' He puckered his brow in an effort to remember. But, before he could speak again, his host supplied the words of the rhyme.

'When two of Maskell blood shall meet
A third who knows no hallowed tomb.

Beware! Beware! For in that hour
A knell shall sound the Maskell doom.
When three of Maskell blood keep tryst
And one alone has tongue to speak,
This prophecy shall clearer be—
Its meaning is not far to seek.'

His sibilant voice whispered through the room and William shivered involuntarily. He gave an uneasy laugh and said, 'Not what you'd call a cheerful verse, is it? I'd quite forgotten all about it until old Clifford's portrait made me think of the secret room and all the tales that were told of our wicked progenitor.'

'Let us forget it,' responded Sir Ambrose. 'Perhaps you'll favour me with a game of cards. It is a long time since I had a partner and one becomes a trifle bored with patience.'

He rose, opened the drawer of a bureau, and produced dice and a pack of cards. William flung a handful of guineas on the table and his half-brother, taking a dozen or so coins from his purse, methodically piled them in a tidy heap in front of him. For a couple of hours the only sounds in the room were the rattle of dice, the swish of cards, and the jingle of money. When the clock struck eleven William was six guineas to the good and did not protest when Ambrose gathered up the cards and suggested it was time for bed.

'You will need a good nightcap to keep out the chills of this old house, William,' he said, crossing to the side-table and selecting a bottle from those placed there by the serving-man. 'Here is a fine crusty port which I think will please your palate.' He filled a goblet and carried it to his guest. 'I do not drink myself before retiring to rest as I find that wine, taken at this hour, makes me disinclined for sleep.'

The younger man accepted the drink and tossed it off. 'A good wine is the best soporific,' he laughed. 'I'll have another glass before you put the bottle away.'

The second goblet was quickly emptied, and William rose to his feet. Ambrose took two candlesticks from the table, lit the tapers at the fire and, handing one to his half-brother, led the way from the room. The flickering lights cast grotesque

shadows as the two men climbed the stairs and Ambrose ushered William into a great chamber in the west wing.

'Sleep well, my brother,' said the elder as he turned to depart. 'Sleep very well and perchance in your dreams you may discover the secrets of the Grange.'

'I never dream,' replied William as the door closed. 'That's the best of having an easy conscience.'

He divested himself of his clothes, donned the nightshirt which Simon Drew had placed in readiness, and climbed into bed. He felt very tired and there was an unpleasant bitterness in his mouth. Blaming it upon too many potations he drew the bedclothes up to his chin and closed his eyes.

William Maskell saw his half-brother's face in the dim light of a lantern, and became painfully aware that something strange had happened to him. Although he was fully conscious and could see what was going on around, a curious numbness gripped his limbs and he was incapable of articulating a word. He heard the thin voice of Sir Ambrose purring like a monstrous cat.

'You cannot move, my dear William. Our ancestor, Sir Clifford, was a clever man and it was he who compounded the drug which I slipped into your wine. For at least two hours you will remain under its influence and, in that time, I will reveal to you all the family secrets. You shall meet our great-grandfather and see the hidden room which he constructed.' His voice broke into a harsh chuckle. 'Not that the knowledge will ever do you any good. You are going to die, my dear William. Surely you did not think I had forgotten the debt I had to settle with you.'

He crossed to the wall and pressed a carved flower on the panelling. With a soft click a concealed door opened and a draught of cold air blew into the room.

'Now,' whispered Sir Ambrose, 'I am going to carry you to the secret chamber. You can understand all I say and see all I do, but your limbs and your tongue are paralysed.' He bent over William, hoisted the unresistant form upon his back, and staggered across the room and through the little door. On the other

side he paused for a moment to close the aperture and then began to descend the winding stone staircase. He frequently stopped to rest and ease himself of the weight but, at last, they came to a low vaulted passage. William saw a massive door, a solid slab of stone, which he observed was tied open with a strip of rush-rope. Beyond was a dismal chamber with damp trickling down the walls.

The cell was furnished with a heavy table and two stools, upon one of which Ambrose deposited his burden. He placed the lantern upon the table, but its feeble gleam left the greater part of the chamber in deep shadow.

'Now,' said the squire of Boulderstone, 'we can talk. At least, I shall have to do all the talking, for you cannot answer me back. We are now in the secret room, far below the waters of the moat. You will notice that I have fastened the door open. The reason for this is that it can only be unlocked from outside and, if it closed whilst I am with you, I should be compelled to share your fate. I have told you that our ancestor was clever, but he wasn't clever enough. I think he got caught by his own device. Look, my dear William.'

Taking the lantern in his hand he carried it to a corner of the cell and its light fell upon a mouldering skeleton to which still clung a few tattered rags.

'Yes, you are quite right,' went on the shrill voice. 'It is our ancestor, Sir Clifford, and the devil did not fly away with him after all.'

William's anguished eyes looked to his half-brother in mute appeal, as if struggling to awaken some feeling of pity in that demented mind.

'It's no use looking at me like that,' shrieked the madman. 'You took the only woman I ever wanted in my life and, although she died so young, you had her youth and beauty. It was your hand that struck me on this very night ten years ago and I swore then that I would have my revenge. I have plotted and planned for this hour. Death is too easy—even the slow death to which you are doomed. The hand that struck me down shall suffer first.'

With fiendish chuckles he retired into the shadows and, lifting something from the ground, brought it into the light. It

was an iron cage containing six large rats.

'They are hungry,' he said, 'very hungry. I have promised them a nice succulent morsel with warm red blood for gravy.'

Taking William's right hand he carefully raised the lid of the cage and then pushed the hand inside. It was a tight fit and effectively blocked the aperture. For a moment the terrified and starved rodents scampered about and then they began to nibble. The madman, with inflamed eyes, watched the blood start to trickle through the bars. As the hand became raw and lacerated by the sharp teeth his hideous laughter filled the vault and he held the lantern high so that he could better witness his half-brother's silent agony.

'The hand first,' he screamed. 'Later the real feast will begin. After I have closed the door and left you with our great-grandfather other rats will come out of the walls, and they are all so hungry. They haven't had a good feed since they gnawed Sir Clifford's flesh off his bones. What a pity it is for you, William, that the drug which has made your limbs so useless has not rendered you insensible to pain. You will soon faint with the agony and then I shall leave you. When you recover from your swoon it will be one man against a thousand rats.'

Neither Ambrose nor the tortured William had noticed a long grey shape which, ever since they had entered the room, had been poised on the length of rush-rope which held the door wide. Its keen teeth had almost severed the frail fastening and, when it dropped to the floor, the cord parted with a snap. Ambrose turned too late. He saw the ponderous stone swinging on its hinges and, with a frantic cry, dashed across to stop it. But, in his haste, he tripped over a stool and, before he could recover himself, the door closed and the secret lock clicked home. With frenzied hands he beat against the rough slab until he was exhausted. His terrified shrieks became more feeble as he realized that his efforts to escape were all in vain.

The dying light of the lantern flickered through the gloom and was reflected in a hundred pairs of little eyes as the grey bodies stole out of the crevices in the walls and waited patiently for the darkness.

The Fetch

by

DAVID SUTTON

Few people have done more to promote fantasy fiction in Britain over the last few years than David Sutton. In 1968 he founded and edited the famous Shadow, *a journal devoted to fantasy which featured news, reviews and fiction, and became the standard publication of its kind in this country.* Shadow *(which ended in 1974) also led to David editing the* New Writings in Horror *series of paperbacks, which was exactly what the title suggested and was one of the best anthology series ever produced. He also edited* The Satyr's Head and Other Tales of Terror *(1975).*

In addition, he has edited the British Fantasy Society's Bulletin, *as well as being Vice-President of the BFS and playing a great part in making it the most important organization in Britain for fantasy fans.*

Despite all these time-consuming activities, David has found time to write many excellent short horror stories and it gives me great pleasure to present a new story here. 'The Fetch' is indeed a chiller: you have been warned ...

'Doppelganger!' Derek Cookson exclaimed.

Finch looked at him with distaste and a little anxiety. The university crowd were hooked all right, their bright, new, blue-eyed boy always seeming to be the life and soul of the party these days. How had he done it, Finch mused? There used to be such a rapport in the twice-weekly pub get-together, yet now he was left out, almost ignored.

Gregson raised a finger in the air to silence the round of laughter that had greeted Cookson's amusing anecdote, 'But

look here, Cookson, I thought a doppelganger was a spirit double, a kind of guardian angel? You've given him rather macabre overtones, don't you think?'

Finch was becoming bored, but took an uneasy glance at Cookson to see what rubbish he would offer in answer. Magic and extra-sensory perception. That was all Cookson ever talked about and they loved it. Why on earth was he taking psychology? Finch frowned, watching the other's face begin to light up again, the beer had tinted his pale, sunken cheeks with little rosy blotches. The eyes still had that disarming black lustre, but they positively seemed to sparkle by the cosy yellow glow of the pub lighting.

'Ah, yes,' Cookson began, 'that's true enough, Gregson, but I can see you've never studied the subject deeply.'

'Hardly ...!'

A ripple of laughter greeted Gregson's look of mock horror, but it was cut short by the arrival of another round of drinks.

'Thanks, Jenny,' Cookson said as the drinks were placed on the table. 'As I was saying, though, there are doppelgangers and there are doppelgangers. There is a particularly virulent kind which assumes the semblance of a double, but with all the evil attributes of the living person—a kind of Jekyll and Hyde thing, where the Hyde image haunts the good, or living party. Nasty.'

'Aren't they supposed to appear to a person when he's about to die?' someone asked.

Finch was becoming explosive. 'Do you practise black magic, Cookson?' he said sharply, the question becoming a statement with its overtones of indignation.

'Yes,' Cookson said blandly. More laughter, as though bursting the sudden balloon of tension offered by Finch, erupted joyously. Nobody noticed Finch leaving hastily.

The streets were empty and wet. It could almost have been three in the morning, Finch thought, but it was only nine thirty; the pubs and cinemas had swallowed the population, leaving the streets calm, deserted. Like a scene from an end-of-the-world movie, Finch imagined. Ten thirty would see the town streaming with life again, disgorged from the establishments of entertainment, each bundle of human life wrapped, cloistered

by alcohol or the images of a film. Finch walked. He had decided not to take the bus home, it would only mean waiting in the cold for twenty minutes. He closed his heavy overcoat about himself, appreciating the warmth within, the radiance from street lamps subtly accentuating this inner glow. Jesus, the streets *are* empty tonight, he thought. Lifeless dummies modelled their wares under the garish brightness of shop window lights. Two male dummies wearing suits seemed to be holding hands. Finch smiled at his thoughts, then his brow furrowed as he gazed at the faces: they were identical.

He shivered.

Cookson had a panache for making people nervous. That was perhaps why he was so popular, everybody liked to be scared occasionally. However, the newcomer to the university drinking group was more than a storyteller. There was something about him, hard to pin down exactly. Finch had noticed it immediately, like a psychic emanation. Jenny had too. 'He's creepy,' she had once confided to Finch, after he had lent a sympathetic ear one night when she had become stoned on booze and cannabis. Not a pleasant combination in large doses. He had taken her home from that party and had stayed with her. Not that anything more had come of it. Jenny was too independent as yet.

Finch's thoughts moved along as he walked. He entered a narrow alleyway, one of those paved, pedestrians-only areas that still had ornate, old-fashioned bollards at either end. 'Needless alley,' he stated to himself. A single, ancient gas lamp stood halfway along the upward slope, casting a flickering yellow glow which illuminated very little of the road. There was the posh little restaurant with the regency style seating and opposite, steam hissing from a dilapidated extractor pipe, the back of a dingy chinese restaurant, its dustbins overflowing with stale food. The back door was slightly ajar, freeing a segment of harsh light to indicate the two dustbins, pointing a metaphorically indignant finger.

The images of familiarity seeped into Finch's mind. Yet there was something oddly amiss about the alley, an atmosphere of ... of pensiveness. He walked on, his crêpe-soled boots splashing a puddle here and there. An office block on one side

and the back of an hotel on the other threatened. The grey sky was a narrow band high above, the rest black slabs of night.

The gas lamp disappeared behind him, the loss of its reassuring glow making him shiver involuntarily. He looked back into the pool of light impulsively. All at once he had the sensation of globules of icy plasma stirring sluggishly in his brain, slowing his actions to a crawl. The hair at the base of his neck quivered. His hand seemed to move slowly to his neck to rub it, to rub away the delicately ticklish yet eerie feeling. His lips opened, the dry tongue making a clicking sound on the palate, a frosty breath of air billowing out, luminous.

The circle of light under the lamp was empty. Yet ... yet it hadn't been for a split second. There was something. Finch strained mentally, trying to recapture memories of a mere second previously which had, by a dint of necessity perhaps, been instantaneously filed down the synaptic gaps to the depths of his subconscious. A shape, round maybe, or crouching. Too horrible to recall. Or merely his imagination? Cookson's nightmare tales hypnotized him.

He hated Cookson.

October had unceremoniously scattered golden-tinged leaves all over the campus. The lawns were flaked with colours, the trees still full of leaves, ready to carpet the ground entirely. Finch nodded gratefully at the streaming sunlight, cold, yet comforting. He met Jenny coming out of biology as he made his way along. 'Hello, Jen. What's new?'

'Hi, Steve,' she answered. 'Nothing much.' Finch hadn't bothered to go to the last few booze-ups, the thought of Cookson spouting all night had had a telling effect. As he gazed at Jenny's tight-fitting sweater and jeans, he wished he had—at least he could have talked to her. He was faintly inquisitive about the meetings he'd missed, but didn't like to ask, so he said, 'Are you going to *The Duck* tonight?'

'No, and I wouldn't advise you to, either. Oh, that blasted Cookson nut has them mesmerized,' she said angrily. 'You'd think it was a university of magic, not science!'

'Perhaps that's what he wants,' Finch said, amused; then, 'But what the hell is going on anyway?'

'A little game, he calls it. Oh, they're going to meet at the pub, have a quick one and then off to the cemetery to perform a—'

'Ritual?' Finch finished the sentence for her.

'How did you know?'

'I could see it coming. Cookson is the type. He's always on about black magic, ESP, all that mumbo-jumbo. Some of his veiled innuendos about him being a practising witch, like his mother and father. You know, he lets it slip on purpose, I think.'

'Yes,' Jenny said simply as they shuffled through a heap of leaves windswept into a pile under an oak. 'You're not thinking of going?' she asked apprehensively.

'Why? But, no. However, I may go to the boneyard and give 'em the fright of their lives. Y'know, put a sheet over my head and all that! After all, it's nearly Hallowe'en. Coming with me?'

'Certainly not. Steve ... they did say that they didn't want you on this trip any way. I don't know why, probably because Cookson took a dislike to you after you walked out the other night. Oh, and correction, it's not *nearly* Hallowe'en, it *is* Hallowe'en.'

'Jesus, what happened to October!'

He felt the insinuating beginning of winter bite into the flesh of his cheeks as he sat hidden behind a conveniently large tombstone. The night was dry, dark and cold, but he had stoked himself with a few beers and his body was warm inside the wrappings of winter clothes. Finch had found it difficult to find a position close enough to Cookson and the others without being seen in the process, but he had done it nevertheless. He felt like a spy and his heart beat rather rapidly as he tried to keep his breathing from giving him away. He didn't know how long the others had been there, but things seemed well under way. He could make out the tall form of Gregson, and Cookson's pallid face showed occasionally in the dim light. The rest

couldn't be seen properly, but Finch guessed that Farquhar and Dunnison were there.

Why had he come, really, Finch thought. He'd not brought a sheet to frighten them as intended. In fact, he had no intention of showing himself. It was Jenny's statement about them not wanting him. Because he was a sceptic or ...

Cookson had begun to chuckle with a low, evil inflection. There were hoarse whispers, louder than the chuckle. 'Shut up, you fools!' Cookson's voice rasped. 'Somebody'll hear us.' Finch had missed it in his cogitations, but suddenly the memory of the sound came back to him—the splintering of wood. God, he thought, they've dug up somebody! He stood up carefully from his crouched position and tried to make out what was going on. There was something large on the ground, it could have been a coffin. Cookson was kneeling over it, placing objects on to what would be the corpse, intoning something as he did so. The others stood, black, human-shaped lumps, fuzzily etched against the sky. A breeze whistled between the sombre stones, the grass rustling as though it were made of pale, cold slivers of plastic.

Then Finch heard a crack in his brain. It was menacingly distinctive, like a bullet shot inside his mind: he had heard his own name. Cookson's voice had spoken it before returning to the droning litany. Then everything went silent for a moment.

A voice spoke to Cookson, it was Dunnison: 'But how will this affect the previous spell?' It was a guttural whisper, but the breeze now carried the words clearly to Finch.

The other replied coldly, 'My previous invocation wasn't strong. Image only. I needed a corpse to strengthen it. Now I must use the knife to finish ...' A glint of light swept above Cookson's head, then plunged down towards the coffin. Cookson spoke a few words that Finch didn't understand as the blade disappeared from view.

Finch was trying not to be seen from the rows of tenement houses as he made his way out of the cemetery. Windows glared light at him, threatening exposure. He could see the morning papers already: 'Desecration of grave and black magic ritual at cemetery.' But no, his description wasn't going to be associated with that: 'The police are looking for a strongly-

built man in his early twenties, fair hair and wearing wire-framed glasses ...' Let those who *were* involved take the rap. He was an innocent bystander and, so it seemed, the very reason for the performance of the ritual. Finch's mind twisted at the thought, brought him to full consciousness again.

He slipped easily down to the main road, looking carefully at the houses. Most had their curtains closed, but an odd one or two were open, a blue effulgence, the flicker of TV screens, creating a kind of macabre, Hallowe'en aura to the houses. The cold was seeping into his clothes, so he decided to have a coffee at a small, dingy café he came to. He needed to think, too, and he couldn't do either of those things whilst walking home.

Finch munched down the hamburger voraciously. He realized that he hadn't eaten since lunch time. He slurped the hot coffee into his mouth, withdrawing the cup from his lips hastily as they burned. Several youths were playing the pin tables with a kind of dedicated fervour, the sound of the balls rolling and pinging against the buffers, the colours and glow of the lights, giving him a sense of assurance. An old juke box with a domed top made of plastic began to issue music. It was *Strawberry Fields*. Jesus, Finch thought, how many years has that been in there! He got up and went to look at the selection of titles. The little, badly typed cards were yellowed with grease and age. He made out something he fancied. *Mr Pleasant* by the Kinks drove away the fantasy world of the Beatles suddenly, and he felt alone. The song cut him with its allusions, its satire he used to love now grating on his nerves. It sacrificed people in song. It tore down solid thought-of walls. He hated those walls, those establishment niceties, but he didn't want them taken away.

Not now, not right at this minute.

Slipping out of the greasy heat of the café, the fog like a grey blanket that is animated with life fell upon him. Curiously thick, sounds were deadened, muffled; even the juke box inside couldn't penetrate to him as he walked into the miasmic smog, moving hurriedly for the bus stop. The gutter to his left guided his feet, his eyes searching for solace in the rubbish littered there: chip papers pasted to the road by the damp-exuding fog, empty cigarette packets, a smashed Coca-Cola bottle.

The fog had come down uncannily quickly, Finch thought.

He began to trot to keep warm, the atmosphere had dropped degrees colder since his stop at the café. A diffused yellow glow ahead, moving towards him, two headlights bright yellow. A bus, damn it, where's the stop? Jesus, I've passed it! He scolded himself mentally. Resignedly he began to walk home. He passed Needless Alley.

No. Another way ...

The starkness of half-demolished walls was softened by the fog, so that they appeared temporary symbols of unreality as he crossed the site of what was to be a shopping centre. Now, half standing buildings, their ghostly rafters sticking into the denser air above, sheltered his movements as he picked his way over rubble. Something caught at his boot, holding him. Gasping, he tripped and fell, lashing out at the barbed-wire that had ripped into his ankle.

Needless Alley beckoned. It would have been easier had Finch not allowed an over-sensitized imagination to control his actions. Getting up, he scraped the mud from his hands. It wouldn't all come off and they felt cold and sticky. His ankle stung and he could feel something ooze inside his boot. He leaned against a wall for a minute to regain some composure. A corner jutted at his right shoulder.

Then Finch heard the breathing. Like his own.

A chill tendril slithered across the top of his brain, his vision dulled to fuzzy-black blobs in a moment of panic. Heart fluttering, Finch drew his breath and held it. The corner of the derelict house was right at his shoulder and he saw the misty exhalations of breath billow out into the stolid fog from the black shadow that the house imposed. The breath was yellow, unhealthy looking.

In his mind, Finch's eyes met Cookson's—black, lustrous orbs, intent and unyielding. Finch knew then, realized Cookson was a witch. Finch was the victim of sorcery ... or was there a simple explanation? Only one thing to do.

Finch jumped out to confront ... whatever it was. He couldn't see, couldn't penetrate the dark properly, his eyes half-lidded by the automatic reflexes of his brain. A brick clattered behind him and he turned quickly, gasping. Crouching against

the backdrop of the smog a shape. A bucket of ice-water had been emptied into Finch's skull, numbing him. Dropping to his knees, his hands jarred into broken bricks. Blood trickled from the left wrist, drawing with it the last warmth from his body. The shape hobbled forward. There was no doubting its tangibility as its feet tumbled the planks of wood it walked on.

It came within the focus of Finch's eyes, the face like jellied lumps, patched together, grotesquely deep wrinkles under eyes that burned with a devouring fire.

'It's a Hallowe'en trick, isn't it!' Finch shouted out loud, an edge of abject horror contained within the scream. He couldn't understand the look in its eyes, like ... like it *wanted* him. Finch's frozen legs lifted him then, making him run blindly, madly away from the visage on the building site. He ran along roads until his lungs burned and heaved within his chest. Thrusting a key into a lock, he fell into his flat, moaning as the floor came up to meet him with a crash. Then, seeing the horrible face again in his mind's eye, Finch realized that it was a monstrous parody, but it was him. It was *himself* warped into that ... that demoniac creature. It was haunting him and in some foul way it retained every feature of Finch within its distorted and loathesomely slimy face. Finch sobbed, smelling the familiar tang of carpet. He rolled into the wall shaking, gradually subsiding into silence. Finch glanced at his watch. One thirty. Was this the end of the nightmare, Hallowe'en now dead and gone? He heard Cookson's evil laugh somewhere at the back of his mind. 'Listen,' a disembodied voice said. He did.

Something was rustling papers in his study ...

Manfred's Three Wishes

by

H. F. W. TATHAM

Of all places, Eton seems to have supplied more ghost story writers than any other British institution. M. R. James was Provost of Eton from 1918 to 1936; A. C. Benson was a master at the college from 1885 to 1905, and one of his closest friends at Eton, also a master, was H. F. W. Tatham, the forgotten author of this forgotten story.

Herbert Tatham, like Benson and James, was a 'big, bluff and burly character' who went from Eton to Cambridge as a pupil, then back to Eton as a master in 1886. Though described by Benson as an extremely genial and placid character, Tatham was fined in a police court while still an Eton schoolboy for assaulting a man who was beating a dog.

Benson and Tatham became inseparable and shared many holidays together, and their friendship continued after Benson left Eton to join Magdalene College, Cambridge in 1905.

Tatham died suddenly and tragically in 1909. He accompanied his nephew on a holiday to the Alps and, while on a walking tour not far from his hotel, slipped and fell down some rocks, injuring himself badly. He never recovered consciousness and died within half an hour. Benson had lost his 'best and dearest friend'.

A year after Tatham's death, his brother M. T. Tatham arranged for the publication of a book of Herbert Tatham's short stories, in accordance with his brother's wishes. The book, now long forgotten, was called The Footprints in the Snow *(1910) and it is from this that I have selected 'Manfred's Three Wishes'.*

Curiously, the tales in that book had much the same history

as those of M. R. James, for Tatham originally wrote them to read aloud to his pupils on Sunday evenings.

Manfred gnawed his fingers with rage and jealousy, and thought bitterly of schemes of vengeance; but none seemed safe to him, as he turned them over in his heart. His enemy was rich and popular, and even if he succeeded in bringing about his death, he could not see how he could himself escape detection and punishment. Even if he did escape, he would perhaps have to face exile and poverty; while there was the third chance, too terrible almost to think of, of failing in his attempt and meeting with punishment himself, a laughing-stock to his enemies.

So he sat and gnawed his fingers, and no light came to him—at least, for a while. Then suddenly he started up, and, flinging back the hair from his forehead with a characteristic gesture, 'I will do it,' he said.

Some hours had passed, and the shades of evening were beginning to fall, when, wrapped in a long hooded cloak, Manfred set forth from the city towards the great dark wood which fringed the slope of the neighbouring hills. He walked swiftly, like one bent on some errand of importance that required haste; and such indeed his errand was, for he was on his way to consult the great wizard of the forest, of whom men spoke with awe and bated breath, as of the Evil One himself. The wizard dwelt in a dark and lonely house in the thickest part of the wood, and few dared to pass near it even in the daytime. As Manfred made his way along the forest path, a hundred sounds and sights of ill-omen encountered him and seemed to forbid his passage. Now the hoot of an owl, now the howl of a wolf, awoke the melancholy echoes of the wood; at another time the branches of the trees, rubbed together by the night wind, sent forth a dreary wailing sound, like the crying of a lost spirit; or some creature of the night, wild-cat, or stoat, or serpent, slipped across the path in front, and vanished rustling amid the bushes that fenced it in on either side. But Manfred

pressed on, and in the heat of his desire for vengeance felt in his heart no chill of premonitory fear.

By and by he came to a clearing in the heart of the wood, and saw the dark bulk of the wizard's house rise before him. As he approached, a light suddenly shone out in an upper room, and the great door of the house swung open of its own accord, showing a dark entry beyond, presently illumined by a lamp held at the head of the stairs by someone scarcely seen, who, addressing him by name, bade him enter. Manfred started at finding himself thus known, but obeyed the command and passed into the house and up the stairs, and then into the room which the figure with the lamp had already entered.

Manfred had anticipated the ordinary terrors associated with a necromancer's abode, the skulls and bones, the familiar in shape of cat or toad, the crocodile hung from the roof; but there were none of these here. The room was circular, and perfectly black, both walls and floor and ceiling; the lamp dimly illumined it, and showed that besides two chairs it contained but one object—a brazier in which coals burned redly.

The magician crouched behind the brazier, and regarded Manfred with open, unwinking eyes. His face was smooth and yellow, like parchment, and even his lips appeared of the same colour. There was no hair on his face or on any part of his head.

Manfred looked at him, and for the first time fear came into his heart. But he mastered it by an effort, and was about to speak when the wizard anticipated him. 'I know your will,' he said; and his voice seemed to come from very far away. Manfred bowed his head, and the wizard went on. 'You seek vengeance, wealth, and power,' he said; 'and these you shall have; shall he not?' he continued, suddenly inclining his head to the right, as if listening; and Manfred thought he heard a voice whisper, 'He shall have these,' and a low crooning laugh followed.

The wizard rose to his feet, and drew from his breast three packets. 'This is for vengeance,' he said, and he cast from the first a red powder on the coals in the brazier. A crimson flame burst forth, and rose high in the air, licking the ceiling of the room. 'Your vengeance shall be complete,' said the wizard; and

with that the flame died down again and only the coals glowed as before.

A second time the wizard drew a packet from his breast. This time the powder was yellow, and when he cast it on the red coals a flame of a deep golden hue started up from them. As before, it licked the ceiling of the chamber, and then sank again, as the wizard said, 'You will attain your desire, and become rich.'

The third packet that was drawn forth contained powder of a purple hue. It was flung into the brazier, and a flame of rich royal purple started up from the coals. But at that moment a wind swept through the room, and the flame, instead of rising to the roof, was whirled downwards and sideways, and presently died out. And the wizard sat silent.

Manfred stared at the glowing coals and the yellow face. But he dared ask no more, and presently, passing down the stairs and out of the house, went forth again into the darkness of the wood. As he crossed the threshold he fancied he heard the wizard—or was it someone else?—laugh in the room above. But he flung back his hair from his forehead and passed out.

Down through the wood he went, and over the open plain that lay between it and the town. When he was about half-way across this, he caught a glimpse of a man on his left walking slowly in the same direction. Something seemed familiar in the man's gait and figure, though the light was dim, and Manfred, slipping behind a great stone, gazed eagerly at him. At that moment the moon shone through a cloud, and Manfred recognized the features of his enemy. The chance of vengeance had come, and that soon.

Coming forth from behind the stone, Manfred, with his drawn knife in his hand, swiftly and silently crept after the man. In a few seconds he was close behind him, and raising the knife, stabbed him with all his force between the shoulders.

The hot blood spurted out over his hand, and the man, with a horrid gurgling groan, sank to the ground and lay on his face, clutching at the earth with his finger-nails. Manfred stood and watched him. Presently he lay still, and Manfred, turning him over, saw that he was dead.

It was plainly needful at once to conceal the body. In all

that flat plain there was no stream or chasm or bush into which it could be cast. But Manfred, looking round, saw that someone had been digging close by and had left his spade behind. Recognizing this as part of the luck promised him by the wizard, he hastily dragged the body behind the great stone, and digging a deep grave, flung it in and piled the earth over it. Then, turning his back on the city, he hurried towards the frontier, safe for a while from all detection or pursuit, and trusting in his lucky star to win riches in another land.

Years passed by. Manfred, under another name, had prospered and grown wealthy, and now, led by instinct, he was returning to his native land. He had crossed the frontier in the early morning, and had reached a low hill from which the flat plain that he remembered so well stretched right up to the city walls. But when he looked out from the hill-top he hardly recognized the place. A great suburb of the city extended over the plain to within a mile or two of where he stood, so that even the wizard's wood was now quite close to the outermost houses. This suburb was well built, with stately houses and temples, and large open spaces, green with grass and trees. But Manfred did not gaze long. He quickly started to ride down the hill. Half-way down it his horse started and shied violently at some movement in the bushes that bordered the road. Manfred tried to steady it, but the animal plunged in uncontrollable terror, and finally slipped and fell heavily, throwing its rider to the ground. Manfred started up at once and, finding himself uninjured, seized his horse's bridle, and pulled it to its feet; but when erect it stood shaking all over, and Manfred soon noticed that it had lamed itself, since it could only put the tip of the hoof of one of its forelegs to the ground. It was plainly impossible to ride it any farther.

Manfred stood doubting how he should proceed. At that moment something came out of the bushes at the side of the road—clearly the animal that had made the rustling noise that frightened Manfred's horse. Manfred soon saw that it was another horse; but he was startled at the strangeness of its appearance. Its colour was piebald, and it had but one eye; and its

gaunt body and long neck and ill-shaped head gave it an uncanny look. But it was plainly in sound condition, and it came and stood quietly beside Manfred, as if expecting him to mount it. The man did not hesitate. To transfer the saddle and bridle from his own horse to the other was the work of a moment, and he was soon again upon his way. It was not long before he came to the gate of the town. He had met one or two people before he reached it, and they had surprised him by either gazing at him in astonishment or running away at full speed so as to reach the gate before him. He put this down to the strange appearance of his horse; but this could not account for the fact that when the gate was flung open and he rode in, the doorkeeper bowed low before him with an air of deep reverence, and the streets were rapidly filling with a crowd that lined them on both sides, and soon broke into loud cheering as Manfred passed between their ranks. Utterly at a loss what to make of these proceedings, he rode on by a street that led him to a large open space in the new suburb. In the middle of this space stood a great altar, hewn out of a single stone—a stone that Manfred had seen before, though he did not recognize it now. The great space was filling with people, and a group came forward to meet Manfred, headed by an old man—plainly a priest—dressed in a long white robe and crowned with a wreath of leaves. When he came close to Manfred he kneeled on one knee, as did those who accompanied him, and hailed him as Lord and King.

Manfred reined up his horse and sat thunderstruck. Vengeance and wealth were his; now power had come suddenly. But he thought there must be some error, and he spoke roughly. 'I am no king,' he said. But the priest bowed lower still. 'You are our king,' he said, 'named so by the oracle.' And he went on to explain that their king had died suddenly a few days before, leaving no heir, and that the oracle had said a new king would come to them from the east, a stranger riding on a one-eyed piebald horse, and that this was why they hailed him as Lord and King.

Manfred sat for a while; then, dismounting, he advanced towards the great altar, and laying his hand upon it, faced the assembled people. The sun shone full upon him for a moment,

as he flung back his hair from his forehead with a gesture characteristic but long forgotten. And at that a woman's voice was raised shrilly somewhere in the crowd.

The people looked round in surprise, as an old woman pushed her way to the front, and, raising her hand, cried out, 'That is no stranger, and shall be no king; it is Manfred the murderer.' And a cloud crept over the sun and a low rolling of thunder filled the air, and some thought the earth trembled under their feet.

Manfred faced the woman. Indignant cries began to rise around her, and some sought to pull her back. But Manfred bade them let her go. 'Woman,' he said, 'I know not of what you speak; I am not Manfred, nor a murderer.' Once more the thunder rolled, and the woman, nothing daunted, looked Manfred in the face. Her grey hair fell loose upon her shoulders, and her eyes shone wildly as she made answer, 'You are Manfred, who slew my son twenty years ago this day, and hid his body and fled. Will you lay your hand on the altar and swear that you are not he?'

Manfred was very pale, but his voice was firm as he answered, 'I will swear,' and he laid his hand upon the altar. 'I swear that I am not Manfred,' said he, 'and am innocent of the blood of this man.' There came a flash of blinding light, against which Manfred and the great altar-stone stood out as black as night; and with the light the thunder crashed overhead. A cry of alarm rose from the throng; and then the earth heaved, and the great altar reeled, and those who stood near saw an arm thrust forth from the ground close to where Manfred stood. The arm was that of a skeleton—knotted, and black, and crusted with mould; and when Manfred saw it he fell upon the ground with a dreadful cry, and the open hand came down upon his throat. When they raised him up he was dead, and his face was black and his eyes stood out like those of a strangled man.

From the Tideless Sea

by

WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

After half a century of neglect, it seems that William Hope Hodgson (1875-1918) is receiving something approaching his due credit in his own country. It is now possible to obtain much of his work in paperback in Britain, and not before time —in America he has been freely available for many years, thanks to the efforts of August Derleth's Arkham House.

Hodgson, the son of an Essex clergyman, went to sea for eight years (an experience he is reported to have disliked intensely) and the sea ever after influenced his writings. Even in such an overtly land-based novel as The House on the Borderland *(1908) Hodgson introduces the sea, albeit one of his own invention. And in the other novels of what he called his trilogy,* The Boats of the Glen Carrig *(1907) and* The Ghost Pirates *(1909) the sea is probably the chief character.*

Hodgson was fascinated with the theme of how close humans live in proximity to unknown and unseen malevolent forces. The Sargasso Sea, to which he returns again and again in his nautical tales, symbolizes this theme, with its all-encompassing weed trapping unfortunate vessels and murderous creatures lurking under the surface.

Of all his tales of the dreaded Sargasso (in actual fact apparently much less of a menace than he describes) 'From the Tideless Sea' is probably the most gripping. It comes from his long-neglected book of short stories Men of the Deep Waters *(1914). It contains horror in plenty, with a unique atmosphere of dread of the unknown, but through it all runs a haunting theme of sadness and despair which in the end heightens the terror to the realms of tragedy.*

* * *

The Captain of the schooner leant over the rail, and stared for a moment, intently.

'Pass us them glasses, Jock,' he said, reaching a hand behind him.

Jock left the wheel for an instant, and ran into the little companionway. He emerged immediately with a pair of marine-glasses, which he pushed into the waiting hand.

For a little, the Captain inspected the object through the binoculars. Then he lowered them, and polished the object glasses.

'Seems like a water-logged barr'l as sumone's been doin' fancy paintin' on,' he remarked after a further stare. 'Shove the 'elm down a bit, Jock, an' we'll 'ave a closer look at it.'

Jock obeyed, and soon the schooner bore almost straight for the object which held the Captain's attention. Presently, it was within some fifty feet, and the Captain sang out to the boy in the caboose to pass along the boathook.

Very slowly, the schooner drew nearer, for the wind was no more than breathing gently. At last the cask was within reach, and the Captain grappled at it with the boathook. It bobbed in the calm water, under his ministrations; and, for a moment, the thing seemed likely to elude him. Then he had the hook fast in a bit of rotten-looking rope which was attached to it. He did not attempt to lift it by the rope; but sang out to the boy to get a bowline round it. This was done, and the two of them hove it up on to the deck.

The Captain could see now that the thing was a small water-breaker, the upper part of which was ornamented with the remains of a painted name.

'H—M—E—B—' spelt out the Captain with difficulty, and scratched his head. ' 'ave a look at this 'ere, Jock. See wot you makes of it.'

Jock bent over from the wheel, expectorated, and then stared at the breaker. For nearly a minute he looked at it in silence.

'I'm thinkin' some of the letterin's washed awa',' he said at last, with considerable deliberation. 'I have ma doots if ye'll be able to read it.

'Hadn't ye no better knock in the end?' he suggested, after a

further period of pondering. 'I'm thinkin' ye'll be lang comin' at them contents otherwise.'

'It's been in the water a thunderin' long time,' remarked the Captain, turning the bottom side upwards. 'Look at them barnacles!'

Then, to the boy:

'Pass along the 'atchet outer the locker.'

Whilst the boy was away, the Captain stood the little barrel on end, kicked away some of the barnacles from the underside. With them, came away a great shell of pitch. He bent, and inspected it.

'Blest if the thing ain't been pitched!' he said. 'This 'ere's been put afloat on purpose, an' they've been mighty anxious as the stuff in it shouldn't be 'armed.'

He kicked away another mass of the barnacle-studded pitch. Then, with a sudden impulse, he picked up the whole thing and shook it violently. It gave out a light, dull, thudding sound, as though something soft and small were within. Then the boy came with the hatchet.

'Stan' clear!' said the Captain, and raised the implement. The next instant, he had driven in one end of the barrel. Eagerly, he stooped forward. He dived his hand down and brought out a little bundle stitched up in oilskin.

'I don' spect as it's anythin' of value,' he remarked. 'But I guess as there's sumthin' 'ere as'll be worth tellin' 'bout when we gets 'ome.'

He slit up the oilskin as he spoke. Underneath, there was another covering of the same material, and under that a third. Then a longish bundle done up in tarred canvas. This was removed, and a black, cylindrical shaped case disclosed to view. It proved to be a tin canister, pitched over. Inside of it, neatly wrapped within a last strip of oilskin, was a roll of papers, which, on opening, the Captain found to be covered with writing. The Captain shook out the various wrappings; but found nothing further. He handed the MS. across to Jock.

'More 'n your line 'n mine, I guess,' he remarked. 'Jest you read it up, an' I'll listen.'

He turned to the boy.

'Fetch the dinner along 'ere. Me an' the Mate'll 'ave it com-

fertable up 'ere, an' you can take the wheel.... Now then, Jock!'

And, presently, Jock began to read.

'THE LOSING OF THE Homebird'

'The *'Omebird*!' exclaimed the Captain. 'Why, she were lost when I were quite a young feller. Let me see—seventy-three. That were it. Tail end of seventy-three when she left 'ome, an' never 'eard of since; not as I knows. Go ahead with the yarn, Jock.'

'It is Christmas eve. Two years ago today, we became lost to the world. Two years! It seems like twenty since I had my last Christmas in England. Now, I suppose, we are already forgotten—and this ship is but one more among the missing! My God! to think upon our loneliness gives me a choking feeling, a tightness across the chest!

'I am writing this in the saloon of the sailing ship, *Homebird*, and writing with but little hope of human eye ever seeing that which I write; for we are in the heart of the dread Sargasso Sea—the Tideless Sea of the North Atlantic. From the stump of our mizzen mast, one may see, spread out to the far horizon, an interminable waste of weed—a treacherous, silent vastitude of slime and hideousness!

'On our port side, distant some seven or eight miles, there is a great, shapeless, discoloured mass. No one, seeing it for the first time, would suppose it to be the hull of a long lost vessel. It bears but little resemblance to a sea-going craft, because of a strange superstructure which has been built upon it. An examination of the vessel herself, through a telescope, tells one that she is unmistakably ancient. Probably a hundred, possibly two hundred, years. Think of it! Two hundred years in the midst of this desolation! It is an eternity.

'At first we wondered at that extraordinary superstructure. Later, we were to learn its use—and profit by the teaching of hands long withered. It is inordinately strange that we should have come upon this sight for the dead! Yet, thought suggests, that there may be many such, which have lain here through the centuries in this World of Desolation. I had not imagined that

the earth contained so much loneliness, as is held within the circle, seen from the stump of our shattered mast. Then comes the thought that I might wander a hundred miles in any direction—and still be lost.

'And that craft yonder, that one break in the monotony, that monument of a few men's misery, serves only to make the solitude the more atrocious; for she is a very effigy of terror, telling of tragedies in the past, and to come!

'And now to get back to the beginnings of it. I joined the *Homebird*, as a passenger, in the early part of November. My health was not quite the thing, and I hoped the voyage would help to set me up. We had a lot of dirty weather for the first couple of weeks out, the wind dead ahead. Then we got a Southerly slant, that carried us down through the forties; but a good deal more the Westward than we desired. Here we ran right into a tremendous cyclonic storm. All hands were called to shorten sail, and so urgent seemed our need, that the very officers went aloft to help make up the sails, leaving only the Captain (who had taken the wheel) and myself upon the poop. On the main-deck, the cook was busy letting go such ropes as the Mates desired.

'Abruptly, some distance ahead, through the vague sea-mist, but rather on the port bow, I saw loom up a great black wall of cloud.

'"Look, Captain!" I exclaimed; but it had vanished before I had finished speaking. A minute later it came again, and this time the Captain saw it.

'"O, my God!" he cried, and dropped his hands from the wheel. He leapt into the companionway, and seized a speaking trumpet. Then out on deck. He put it to his lips.

'"Come down from aloft! Come down! Come down!" he shouted. And suddenly I lost his voice in a terrific mutter of sound from somewhere to port. It was the voice of the storm—shouting. My God! I had never heard anything like it! It ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and in the succeeding quietness, I heard the whining of the kicking-tackles through the blocks. Then came a quick clang of brass upon the deck, and I turned quickly. The Captain had thrown down the trumpet, and sprung back to the wheel. I glanced aloft, and saw that many

of the men were already in the rigging, and racing down like cats.

'I heard the Captain draw his breath with a quick gasp.

' "Hold on for your lives!" he shouted, in a hoarse, unnatural voice.

'I looked at him. He was staring to windward with a fixed stare of painful intentness, and my gaze followed his. I saw, not four hundred yards distant, an enormous mass of foam and water coming down upon us. In the same instant, I caught the hiss of it, and immediately it was a shriek, so intense and awful, that I cringed impotently with sheer terror.

'The smother of water and foam took the ship a little fore-side of the beam, and the wind was with it. Immediately, the vessel rolled over on to her side, the sea-froth flying over her in tremendous cataracts.

'It seemed as though nothing could save us. Over, over we went, until I was swinging against the deck, almost as against the side of a house; for I had grasped the weather rail at the Captain's warning. As I swung there, I saw a strange thing. Before me was the port quarter boat. Abruptly, the canvas cover was flipped clean off it, as though by a vast, invisible hand.

'The next instant, a flurry of oars, boats' masts and odd gear flittered up into the air, like so many feathers, and blew to leeward and was lost in the roaring chaos of foam. The boat, herself, lifted in her chocks, and suddenly was blown clean down on to the maindeck, where she lay all in a ruin of white-painted timbers.

'A minute of the most intense suspense passed; then, suddenly, the ship righted, and I saw that the three masts had carried away. Yet, so hugely loud was the crying of the storm, that no sound of their breaking had reached me.

'I looked towards the wheel; but no one was there. Then I made out something crumpled up against the lee rail. I struggled across to it, and found that it was the Captain. He was insensible, and queerly limp in his right arm and leg. I looked round. Several of the men were crawling aft along the poop. I beckoned to them, and pointed to the wheel, and then to the Captain. A couple of them came towards me, and one went to the wheel.

Then I made out through the spray the form of the Second Mate. He had several more of the men with him, and they had a coil of rope, which they took forrard. I learnt afterwards that they were hastening to get out a sea-anchor, so as to keep the ship's head towards the wind.

'We got the Captain below, and into his bunk. There, I left him in the hands of his daughter and the steward, and returned on deck.

'Presently, the Second Mate came back, and with him the remainder of the men. I found then that only seven had been saved in all. The rest had gone.

'The day passed terribly—the wind getting stronger hourly; though, at its worst, it was nothing like so tremendous as that first burst.

'The night came—a night of terror, with the thunder and hiss of the giant seas in the air above us, and the wind bellowing like some vast elemental beast.

'Then, just before the dawn, the wind lulled, almost in a moment; the ship rolling and wallowing fearfully, and the water coming aboard—hundreds of tons at a time. Immediately afterwards it caught us again; but more on the beam, and bearing the vessel over on to her side, and this only by the pressure of the element upon the stark hull. As we came head to wind again, we righted, and rode, as we had for hours, amid a thousand fantastic hills of phosphorescent flame.

'Again the wind died—coming again after a longer pause, and then, all at once, leaving us. And so, for the space of a terrible half hour, the ship lived through the most awful, windless sea that can be imagined. There was no doubting but that we had driven right into the calm centre of the cyclone—calm only so far as lack of wind, and yet more dangerous a thousand times than the most furious hurricane that ever blew.

'For now we were beset by the stupendous Pyramidal Sea; a sea once witnessed, never forgotten; a sea in which the whole bosom of the ocean is projected towards heaven in monstrous hills of water; not leaping forward, as would be the case if there were wind; but hurling upwards in jets and peaks of living brine, and falling back in a continuous thunder of foam.

'Imagine this, if you can, and then have the clouds break away suddenly overhead, and the moon shine down upon that hellish turmoil, and you will have such a sight as has been given to mortals but seldom, save with death. And this is what we saw, and to my mind there is nothing within the knowledge of man to which I can liken it.

'Yet we lived through it, and through the wind that came later. But two more complete days and nights had passed, before the storm ceased to be a terror to us, and then, only because it had carried us into the seaweed laden waters of the vast Sargasso Sea.

'Here, the great billows first became foamless; and dwindled gradually in size as we drifted further among the floating masses of weed. Yet the wind was still furious, so that the ship drove on steadily, sometimes between banks, and other times over them.

'For a day and a night we drifted thus; and then astern I made out a great bank of weed, vastly greater than any which hitherto we had encountered. Upon this, the wind drove us stern foremost, so that we over-rode it. We had been forced some distance across it, when it occurred to me that our speed was slackening. I guessed presently that the sea-anchor, ahead, had caught in the weed, and was holding. Even as I surmised this, I heard from beyond the bows a faint, droning, twanging sound, blending with the roar of the wind. There came an indistinct report, and the ship lurched backwards through the weed. The hawser, connecting us with the sea-anchor, had parted.

'I saw the Second Mate run forrard with several men. They hauled in upon the hawser, until the broken end was aboard. In the meantime, the ship, having nothing ahead to keep her "bows on", began to slew broadside towards the wind. I saw the men attach a chain to the end of the broken hawser; then they paid it out again, and the ship's head came back to the gale.

'When the Second Mate came aft, I asked him why this had been done, and he explained that so long as the vessel was end-on, she would travel over the weed. I inquired why he wished her to go over the weed, and he told me that one of the

men had made out what appeared to be clear water astern, and that—could we gain it—we might win free.

'Through the whole of that day, we moved rearwards across the great bank; yet, so far from the weed appearing to show signs of thinning, it grew steadily thicker, and, as it became denser, so did our speed slacken, until the ship was barely moving. And so the night found us.

'The following morning discovered to us that we were within a quarter of a mile of a great expanse of clear water—apparently the open sea; but unfortunately the wind had dropped to a moderate breeze, and the vessel was motionless, deep sunk in the weed; great tufts of which rose up on all sides, to within a few feet of the level of our main-deck.

'A man was sent up the stump of the mizzen, to take a look round. From there, he reported that he could see something, that might be weed, across the water; but it was too far distant for him to be in any way certain. Immediately afterwards, he called out that there was something, away on our port beam; but what it was, he could not say, and it was not until a telescope was brought to bear, that we made it out to be the hull of the ancient vessel I have previously mentioned.

'And now, the Second Mate began to cast about for some means by which he could bring the ship to the clear water astern. The first thing which he did, was to bend a sail to a spare yard, and hoist it to the top of the mizzen stump. By this means, he was able to dispense with the cable towing over the bows, which, of course, helped to prevent the ship from moving. In addition, the sail would prove helpful to force the vessel across the weed. Then he routed out a couple of kedges. These, he bent on to the ends of a short piece of cable, and, to the bight of this, the end of a long coil of strong rope.

'After that, he had the starboard quarter boat lowered into the weed, and in it he placed the two kedge anchors. The end of another length of rope, he made fast to the boat's painter. This done, he took four of the men with him, telling them to bring chain-hooks, in addition to the oars—his intention being to force the boat through the weed, until he reached the clear water. There, in the marge of the weed, he would plant two anchors in the thickest clumps of the growth; after which we

were to haul the boat back to the ship, by means of the rope attached to the painter.

'"Then," as he put it, "we'll take the kedge-rope to the capstan, and heave her out of this blessed cabbage heap!"

'The weed proved a greater obstacle to the progress of the boat, than, I think, he had anticipated. After half an hour's work, they had gone scarcely more than some two hundred feet from the vessel; yet, so thick was the stuff, that no sign could we see of them, save the movement they made among the weed, as they forced the boat along.

'Another quarter of an hour passed away, during which the three men left upon the poop, paid out the ropes as the boat forged slowly ahead. All at once, I heard my name called. Turning, I saw the Captain's daughter in the companionway, beckoning to me. I walked across to her.

'"My father has sent me up to know, Mr Philips, how they are getting on?"

'"Very slowly, Miss Knowles," I replied. "Very slowly indeed. The weed is so extraordinarily thick."

'She nodded intelligently, and turned to descend; but I detained her a moment.

'"Your father, how is he?" I asked.

'She drew her breath swiftly.

'"Quite himself," she said, "but so dreadfully weak. He—"

'An outcry from one of the men, broke across her speech:

'"Lord 'elp us, mates! Wot were that!"

'I turned sharply. The three of them were staring over the taffrail. I ran towards them, and Miss Knowles followed.

'"Hush!" she said, abruptly. "Listen!"

'I stared astern to where I knew the boat to be. The weed all about it was quaking queerly—the movement extending far beyond the radius of their hooks and oars. Suddenly, I heard the Second Mate's voice:

'"Look out, lads! My God, look out!"

'And close upon this, blending almost with it, came the hoarse scream of a man in sudden agony.

'I saw an oar come up into view, and descend violently, as though someone struck at something with it. Then the Second Mate's voice, shouting:

'"Aboard there! Aboard there! Haul in on the rope! Haul in on the rope——!" It broke off into a sharp cry.

'As we seized hold of the rope, I saw the weed hurled in all directions, and a great crying and choking swept to us over the brown hideousness around.

'"Pull!" I yelled, and we pulled. The rope tautened; but the boat never moved.

'"Wind it on the capstan!" gasped one of the men.

'Even as he spoke, the rope slackened.

'"It's coming!" cried Miss Knowles. "Pull! Oh! Pull!"

'She had hold of the rope along with us, and together we hauled, the boat yielding to our strength with surprising ease.

'"There it is!" I shouted, and then I let go of the rope. There was no one in the boat.

'For the half of a minute, we stared, dumbfounded. Then my gaze wandered astern to the place from which we had plucked it. There was a heaving movement among the great weed masses. I saw something waver up aimlessly against the sky; it was sinuous, and it flickered once or twice from side to side; then sank back among the growth, before I could concentrate my attention upon it.

'I was recalled to myself by a sound of dry sobbing. Miss Knowles was kneeling upon the deck, her hands clasped round one of the iron uprights of the rail. She seemed momentarily all to pieces.

'"Come! Miss Knowles," I said, gently. "You must be brave. We cannot let your father know of this in his present state."

'She allowed me to help her to her feet. I could feel that she was trembling badly. Then, even as I sought for words with which to reassure her, there came a dull thud from the direction of the companionway. We looked round. On the deck, face downward, lying half in and half out of the scuttle, was the Captain. Evidently, he had witnessed everything. Miss Knowles gave out a wild cry, and ran to her father. I beckoned to one of the men to help me, and, together, we carried him back to his bunk. An hour later, he recovered from his swoon. He was quite calm, though very weak, and evidently in considerable pain.

'Through his daughter, he made known to me that he wished

me to take the reins of authority in his place. This, after a slight demur, I decided to do; for, as I reassured myself, there were no duties required of me, needing any special knowledge of ship-craft. The vessel was fast; so far as I could see, irrevocably fast. It would be time to talk of freeing her, when the Captain was well enough to take charge once more.

'I returned on deck, and made known to the men the Captain's wishes. Then I chose one to act as a sort of bo'sun over the other two, and to him I gave orders that everything should be put to rights before the night came. I had sufficient sense to leave him to manage matters in his own way, for, whereas my knowledge of what was needful, was fragmentary, his was complete.

'By this time, it was near to sunsetting, and it was with melancholy feelings that I watched the great hull of the sun plunge lower. For awhile, I paced the poop, stopping ever and anon to stare over the dreary waste by which we were surrounded. The more I looked about, the more a sense of lonesomeness and depression and fear assailed me. I had pondered much upon the dread happening of the day, and all my ponderings led to a vital questioning: What was there among all that quiet weed, which had come upon the crew of the boat, and destroyed them? And I could not make answer, and the weed was silent—deadly silent!

'The sun had drawn very near to the dim horizon, and I watched it, moodily, as it splashed great clots of red fire across the water that lay stretched into the distance across our stern. Abruptly, as I gazed, its perfect lower edge was marred by an irregular shape. For a moment, I stared, puzzled. Then I fetched a pair of glasses from the holdfast in the companion. A glance through these, and I knew the extent of our fate. That line, blotching the round of the sun, was the conformation of another enormous weed bank.

'I remembered that the man had reported something as showing across the water, when he was sent up to the top of the mizzen stump in the morning; but, what it was, he had been unable to say. The thought flashed into my mind that it had been only *just* visible from aloft in the morning, and now it was in sight from the deck. It occurred to me that the wind

might be compacting the weed, and driving the bank which surrounded the ship, down upon a larger portion. Possibly, the clear stretch of water had been a temporary rift within the heart of the Sargasso Sea. It seemed only too probable.

'Thus it was that I meditated, and so, presently, the night found me. For some hours further, I paced the deck in the darkness, striving to understand the incomprehensible; yet with no better result than to weary myself to death. Then, somewhere about midnight, I went below to sleep.

'The following morning, on going on deck, I found that the stretch of clear water had disappeared entirely, during the night, and now, so far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but a stupendous desolation of weed.

'The wind had dropped completely, and no sound came from all that weed-ridden immensity. We had, in truth, reached the Cemetery of the Ocean!

'The day passed uneventfully enough. It was only when I served out some food to the men, and one of them asked whether they could have a few raisins, that I remembered, with a pang of sudden misery, that it was Christmas day. I gave them the fruit, as they desired, and they spent the morning in the galley, cooking their dinner. Their stolid indifference to the late terrible happenings, appalled me somewhat, until I remembered what their lives were, and had been. Poor fellows! One of them ventured aft at dinner time, and offered me a slice of what he called "plum duff". He brought it on a plate which he had found in the galley and scoured thoroughly with sand and water. He tendered it shyly enough, and I took it, so graciously as I could, for I would not hurt his feelings; though the very smell of the stuff was an abomination.

'During the afternoon, I brought out the Captain's telescope, and made a thorough examination of the ancient hulk on our port beam. Particularly did I study the extraordinary superstructure around her sides; but could not, as I have said before, conceive of its use.

'The evening, I spent upon the poop, my eyes searching wearily across that vile quietness, and so, in a little, the night came—Christmas night, sacred to a thousand happy memories. I found myself dreaming of the night a year previous, and, for

a little while, I forgot what was before me. I was recalled suddenly—terribly. A voice rose out of the dark which hid the maindeck. For the fraction of an instant, it expressed surprise; then pain and terror leapt into it. Abruptly, it seemed to come from above, and then from somewhere *beyond* the ship, and so in a moment there was silence, save for the rush of feet and the bang of a door forrard.

'I leapt down the poop ladder, and ran along the maindeck, towards the fo'cas'le. As I ran, something knocked off my cap. I scarcely noticed it *then*. I reached the fo'cas'le, and caught at the latch of the port door. I lifted it and pushed; but the door was fastened.

'"Inside there!" I cried, and banged upon the panels with my clenched fist.

'A man's voice came, incoherently.

'"Open the door!" I shouted. "Open the door!"

'"Yes, Sir—I'm com—ming, Sir," said one of them, jerkily.

'I heard footsteps stumble across the planking. Then a hand fumbled at the fastening, and the door flew open under my weight.

'The man who had opened to me, started back. He held a flaring slush-lamp above his head, and, as I entered, he thrust it forward. His hand was trembling visibly, and, behind him. I made out the face of one of his mates, his brow and dirty, clean-shaven upper lip drenched with sweat. The man who held the lamp, opened his mouth, and gabbered at me; but, for a moment, no sound came.

'"Wot—wot were it? Wot we-ere it?' he brought out at last, with a gasp.

The man behind, came to his side, and gesticulated.

'"What was what?" I asked sharply, and looking from one to the other. "Where's the other man? What was that screaming?'

'The second man drew the palm of his hand across his brow; then flirted his fingers deckwards.

'"We don't know, Sir! We don't know! It were Jessop! Somethin's took 'im just as we was comin' forrid! We—we—He—he—HARK!"

'His head came forward with a jerk as he spoke, and then,

for a space, no one stirred. A minute passed, and I was about to speak, when, suddenly, from somewhere out upon the deserted maindeck, there came a queer, subdued noise, as though something moved stealthily hither and thither. The man with the lamp caught me by the sleeve, and then, with an abrupt movement, slammed the door and fastened it.

'"That's IT, Sir!" he exclaimed, with a note of terror and conviction in his voice.

'I bade him be silent, while I listened; but no sound came to us through the door, and so I turned to the men and told them to let me have all they knew.

'It was little enough. They had been sitting in the galley, yarning, until, feeling tired, they had decided to go forrard and turn-in. They extinguished the light, and came out upon the deck, closing the door behind them. Then, just as they turned to go forrard, Jessop gave out a yell. The next instant they heard him screaming in the air above their heads, and, realizing that some terrible thing was upon them, they took forthwith to their heels, and ran for the security of the fo'cas'le.

'Then I had come.

'As the men made an end of telling me, I thought I heard something outside, and held up my hand for silence. I caught the sound again. Someone was calling my name. It was Miss Knowles. Likely enough she was calling me to supper—and she had no knowledge of the dread thing which had happened. I sprang to the door. She might be coming along the maindeck in search of me. And there was Something out there, of which I had no conception—something unseen, but deadly tangible!

'"Stop, Sir!" shouted the men, together; but I had the door open.

'"Mr Philips!" came the girl's voice at no great distance. "Mr Philips!"

'"Coming, Miss Knowles!" I shouted, and snatched the lamp from the man's hand.

'The next instant, I was running aft, holding the lamp high, and glancing fearfully from side to side. I reached the place where the mainmast had been, and spied the girl coming towards me.

'"Go back!" I shouted. "Go back!"

'She turned at my shout, and ran for the poop ladder. I came up with her, and followed close at her heels. On the poop, she turned and faced me.

'"What is it, Mr Philips?"

'I hesitated. Then—

'"I don't know!" I said.

'"My father heard something," she began. "He sent me. He—"

'I put up my hand. It seemed to me that I had caught again the sound of something stirring on the maindeck.

'"Quick!" I said sharply. "Down into the cabin!" And she, being a sensible girl, turned and ran down without waste of time. I followed, closing and fastening the companion-doors behind me.

'In the saloon, we had a whispered talk, and I told her everything. She bore up bravely, and said nothing; though her eyes were very wide, and her face pale. Then the Captain's voice came to us from the adjoining cabin.

'"Is Mr Philips there, Mary?'

'"Yes, father."

'"Bring him in."

'I went in.

'"What was it, Mr Philips?" he asked, collectedly.

'I hesitated; for I was willing to spare him the ill news; but he looked at me with calm eyes for a moment, and I knew that it was useless attempting to deceive him.

'"Something has happened, Mr Philips," he said, quietly. "You need not be afraid to tell me."

'At that, I told him so much as I knew, he listening, and nodding his comprehension of the story.

'"It must be something big," he remarked, when I had made an end, "And yet you saw nothing when you came aft?"

'"No," I replied.

'"It is something in the weed," he went on. "You will have to keep off the deck at night."

'After a little further talk, in which he displayed a calmness that amazed me, I left him, and went presently to my berth.

'The following day, I took the two men, and together, we

made a thorough search through the ship; but found nothing. It was evident to me that the Captain was right. There was some dread Thing hidden within the weed. I went to the side and looked down. The two men followed me. Suddenly, one of them pointed.

'"Look, Sir!" he exclaimed. "Right below you, Sir! Two eyes like blessed great saucers! Look!"

'I stared; but could see nothing. The man left my side, and ran into the galley. In a moment, he was back with a great lump of coal.

'"Just there, Sir," he said, and hove it down into the weed immediately beneath where we stood.

'Too late, I saw the thing at which he aimed—two immense eyes, some little distance below the surface of the weed. I knew instantly to what they belonged; for I had seen large specimens of the octopus some years previously, during a cruise in Australasian waters.

'"Look out, man!" I shouted, and caught him by the arm. "It's an octopus! Jump back!" I sprang down on the deck. In the same instant, huge masses of weed were hurled in all directions, and half a dozen immense tentacles whirled up into the air. One lapped itself about his neck. I caught his leg; but he was torn from my grasp, and I tumbled backwards on to the deck. I heard a scream from the other man as I scrambled to my feet. I looked to where he had been; but of him there was no sign. Regardless of the danger, in my great agitation, I leapt upon the rail, and gazed down with frightened eyes. Yet, neither of him nor his mate, nor the monster, could I perceive a vestige.

'How long I stood there staring down bewilderedly, I cannot say; certainly some minutes. I was so bemazed that I seemed incapable of movement. Then, all at once, I became aware that a light quiver ran across the weed, and next instant, something stole up out of the depths with a deadly celerity. Well it was for me that I had seen it in time, else should I have shared the fate of those two—and the others. As it was, I saved myself only by leaping backwards on to the deck. For a moment, I saw the feeler wave above the rail with a certain apparent aimlessness; then it sank out of sight, and I was alone.

'An hour passed before I could summon a sufficiency of

courage to break the news of this last tragedy to the Captain and his daughter, and when I had made an end, I returned to the solitude of the poop; there to brood upon the hopelessness of our position.

'As I paced up and down, I caught myself glancing continuously at the nearer weed tufts. The happenings of the past two days had shattered my nerves, and I feared every moment to see some slender death-grapple searching over the rail for me. Yet, the poop, being very much higher out of the weed than the maindeck, was comparatively safe; though only comparatively.

'Presently, as I meandered up and down, my gaze fell upon the hulk of the ancient ship, and, in a flash, the reason for that great superstructure was borne upon me. It was intended as a protection against the dread creatures which inhabited the weed. The thought came to me that I would attempt some similar means of protection; for the feeling that, at any moment, I might be caught and lifted out into that slimy wilderness, was not to be borne. In addition, the work would serve to occupy my mind, and help me to bear up against the intolerable sense of loneliness which assailed me.

'I resolved that I would lose no time, and so, after some thought as to the manner in which I should proceed, I routed out some coils of rope and several sails. Then I went down on to the maindeck and brought up an armful of capstan bars. These I lashed vertically to the rail all round the poop. Then I knotted the rope to each, stretching it tightly between them, and over this framework stretched the sails, sewing the stout canvas to the rope, by means of twine and some great needles which I found in the Mate's room.

'It is not to be supposed that this piece of work was accomplished immediately. Indeed, it was only after three days of hard labour that I got the poop completed. Then I commenced work upon the maindeck. This was a tremendous undertaking, and a whole fortnight passed before I had the entire length of it enclosed; for I had to be continually on the watch against the hidden enemy. Once, I was very nearly surprised, and saved myself only by a quick leap. Thereafter, for the rest of that day, I did no more work; being too greatly shaken in spirit. Yet,

on the following morning, I recommenced, and from thence, until the end, I was not molested.

'Once the work was roughly completed, I felt at ease to begin and perfect it. This I did, by tarring the whole of the sails with Stockholm tar; thereby making them stiff, and capable of resisting the weather. After that, I added many fresh uprights, and much strengthening ropework, and finally doubled the sailcloth with additional sails, liberally smeared with the tar.

'In this manner, the whole of January passed away, and a part of February. Then, it would be on the last day of the month, the Captain sent for me, and told me, without any preliminary talk, that he was dying. I looked at him; but said nothing; for I had known long that it was so. In return, he stared back with a strange intentness, as though he would read my inmost thoughts, and this for the space of perhaps two minutes.

'"Mr Philips," he said at last, "I may be dead by this time tomorrow. Has it ever occurred to you that my daughter will be alone with you?"

'"Yes, Captain Knowles," I replied, quietly, and waited.

'For a few seconds, he remained silent; though from the changing expressions of his face, I knew that he was pondering how best to bring forward the thing which it was in his mind to say.

'"You are a gentleman——" he began, at last.

'"I will marry her," I said, ending the sentence for him.

'A slight flush of surprise crept into his face.

'"You—you have thought seriously about it?"

'"I have thought very seriously," I explained.

'"Ah!" he said, as one who comprehends. And then, for a little, he lay there quietly. It was plain to me that memories of past days were with him. Presently, he came out of his dreams, and spoke, evidently referring to my marriage with his daughter.

'"It is the only thing," he said, in a level voice.

'I bowed, and after that, he was silent again for a space. In a little, however, he turned once more to me:

'"Do you—do you love her?"

'His tone was keenly wistful, and a sense of trouble lurked in his eyes.

'"She will be my wife," I said, simply; and he nodded.

'"God has dealt strangely with us," he murmured, presently, as though to himself.

'Abruptly, he bade me to tell her to come in.

'And then he married us.

'Three days later, he was dead, and we were alone.

'For a while, my wife was a sad woman; but gradually time eased her of the bitterness of her grief.

'Then, some eight months after our marriage, a new interest stole into her life. She whispered it to me, and we, who had borne our loneliness uncomplainingly, had now this new thing to which to look forward. It became a bond between us, and bore promise of some companionship as we grew old. Old! At the idea of age, a sudden flash of thought darted like lightning across the sky of my mind:—FOOD! Hitherto, I thought of myself, almost as of one already dead, and had cared naught for anything beyond the immediate troubles which each day forced upon me. The loneliness of the vast Weed-World had become an assurance of doom to me, which had clouded and dulled my faculties, so that I had grown apathetic. Yet, immediately, as it seemed, at the shy whispering of my wife, was all this changed.

'That very hour, I began a systematic search through the ship. Among the cargo, which was of a "general" nature, I discovered large quantities of preserved and tinned provisions, all of which I put carefully on one side. I continued my examination until I had ransacked the whole vessel. The business took me near upon six months to complete, and when it was finished, I seized paper, and made calculations, which led to the conclusion that we had sufficient food in the ship to preserve life in three people for some fifteen to seventeen years. I could not come nearer to it than this; for I had no means of computing the quantity the child would need year by year. Yet it is sufficient to show me that seventeen years *must* be the limit. Seventeen years! And then—

'Concerning water, I am not troubled; for I have rigged a great sailcloth tun-dish, with a canvas pipe into the tanks; and

from every rain, I draw a supply, which has never run short.

'The child was born nearly five months ago. She is a fine little girl, and her mother seems perfectly happy. I believe I could be quietly happy with them, were it not that I have ever in mind the end of those seventeen years. True! we may be dead long before then; but, if not, our little girl will be in her teens—and it is a hungry age.

'If one of us died—but no! Much may happen in seventeen years. I will wait.

'My method of sending this clear of the weed is likely to succeed. I have constructed a small fire-balloon, and this missive, safely enclosed in a little barrel, will be attached. The wind will carry it swiftly hence.

'Should this ever reach civilized beings, will they see that it is forwarded to—'

(Here followed an address, which, for some reason, had been roughly obliterated. Then came the signature of the writer)

'Arthur Samuel Philips.'

The captain of the schooner looked over at Jock, as the man made an end of his reading.

'Seventeen years pervisions,' he muttered thoughtfully. 'An' this 'ere were written sumthin' like twenty-nine years ago! He nodded his head several times. 'Poor creatures!' he exclaimed.

'It'd be a long while, Jock—a long while!'

II

In the August of 1902, Captain Bateman, of the schooner *Agnes*, picked up a small barrel, upon which was painted a half obliterated word; which, finally, he succeeded in deciphering as 'Homebird', the name of a full-rigged ship, which left London in the November of 1873, and from thenceforth was heard of no more by any man.

Captain Bateman opened the barrel, and discovered a packet of manuscript, wrapped in oilskin. This, on examination, proved to be an account of the losing of the *Homebird* amid

the desolate wastes of the Sargasso Sea. The papers were written by one Arthur Samuel Philips, a passenger in the ship; and, from them, Captain Bateman was enabled to gather that the ship, mastless, lay in the very heart of the dreaded Sargasso; and that all of the crew had been lost—some in the storm which drove them thither, and some in attempts to free the ship from the weed, which locked them in on all sides.

Only Mr Philips and the Captain's daughter had been left alive, and they two, the dying Captain had married. To them had been born a daughter, and the papers ended with a brief but touching allusion to their fear that, eventually, they must run short of food.

There is need to say but little more. The account was copied into most of the papers of the day, and caused widespread comment. There was even some talk of fitting out a rescue expedition; but this fell through, owing chiefly to lack of knowledge of the whereabouts of the ship in all the vastness of the immense Sargasso Sea. And so, gradually, the matter has slipped into the background of the public's memory.

Now, however, interest will be once more excited in the lonesome fate of this lost trio; for a second barrel, identical, it would seem, with that found by Captain Bateman, has been picked up by a Mr Bolton, of Baltimore, master of a small brig, engaged in the South American coast-trade. In this barrel was enclosed a further message from Mr Philips—the fifth that he has sent abroad to the world; but the second, third and fourth, up to this time, have not been discovered.

This "fifth message" contains a vital and striking account of their lives during the year 1879, and stands unique as a document informed with human lonesomeness and longing. I have seen it, and read it through, with the most intense and painful interest. The writing, though faint, is very legible; and the whole manuscript bears the impress of the same hand and mind that wrote the piteous account of the losing of the *Homebird*, of which I have already made mention, and with which, no doubt, many are well acquainted.

In closing this little explanatory note, I am stimulated to wonder whether, somewhere, at some time, those three missing messages ever shall be found. And then there may be others.

What stories of human, strenuous fighting with Fate may they not contain. We can but wait and wonder. Nothing more may we ever learn; for what is this one little tragedy among the uncounted millions that the silence of the sea holds so remorselessly. And yet, again, news may come to us of the Unknown—out of the lonesome silences of the dread Sargasso Sea—the loneliest and the most inaccessible place of all the lonesome and inaccessible places of this earth.

And so I say, let us wait. W. H. H.

THE FIFTH MESSAGE

'This is the fifth message that I have sent abroad over the loathsome surface of this vast Weed-World, praying that it may come to the open sea, ere the lifting power of my fire-balloon be gone, and yet, if it come there—the which I could now doubt—how shall I be the better for it! Yet write I must, or go mad, and so I choose to write, though feeling as I write that no living creature, save it be the giant octopi that live in the weed about me, will ever see the thing I write.

'My first message I sent out on Christmas Eve, 1875, and since then each eve of the birth of Christ has seen a message go skywards upon the winds, towards the open sea. It is as though this approaching time, of festivity and the meeting of parted loved ones, overwhelms me, and drives away the half apathetic peace that has been mine through spaces of these years of lonesomeness; so that I seclude myself from my wife and the little one, and with ink, pen, and paper, try to ease my heart of the pent emotions that seem at times to threaten to burst it.

'It is now six completed years since the Weed-World claimed us from the World of the Living—six years away from our brothers and sisters of the human and living world— It has been six years of living in a grave! And there are all the years ahead! Oh my God! my God! I dare not think upon them! I must control myself——

'And then there is the little one, she is nearly four and a half now, and growing wonderfully, out among these wilds. Four and a half years, and the little woman has never seen a human face besides ours—think of it! And yet, if she lives four

and forty years, she will never see another.... Four and forty years! It is foolishness to trouble about such a space of time; for the future, for us, ends in ten years—eleven at the utmost. Our food will last no longer than that.... My wife does not know; for it seems to me a wicked thing to add unnecessarily to her punishment. She does but know that we must waste no ounce of food-stuff, and for the rest she imagines that the most of the cargo is of an edible nature. Perhaps, I have nurtured this belief. If anything happened to me, the food would last a few extra years; but my wife would have to imagine it an accident, else would each bite she took sicken her.

'I have thought often and long upon this matter, yet I fear to leave them; for who knows but that their very lives might at any time depend upon my strength, more pitifully, perhaps, than upon the food which they must come at last to lack. No, I must not bring upon them, and myself, a *near* and *certain* calamity, to defer one that, though it seems to have but little less certainty, is yet at a further distance.

'Until lately, nothing has happened to us in the past four years, if I except the adventures that attended my mad attempt to cut a way through the surrounding weed to freedom, and from which it pleased God that I and those with me should be preserved. Yet, in the latter part of this year an adventure, much touched with grimness, came to us most unexpectedly, in a fashion quite unthought of—an adventure that has brought into our lives a fresh and more active peril; for now I have learned that the weed holds other terrors besides that of the giant octopi.

'Indeed, I have grown to believe this world of desolation capable of holding *any* horror, as well it might. Think of it—an interminable stretch of dank, brown loneliness in all directions, to the distant horizon; a place where monsters of the deep and the weed have undisputed reign; where never an enemy may fall upon them; but from which they may strike with sudden deadliness! No human can ever bring an engine of destruction to bear upon them, and the humans whose fate it is to have sight of them, do so only from the decks of lonesome derelicts, whence they stare lonely with fear, and without ability to harm.

'I cannot describe it, nor can any hope ever to imagine it! When the wind falls, a vast silence holds us girt, from horizon to horizon, yet it is a silence through which one seems to feel the pulse of hidden things all about us, watching and waiting—waiting and watching; waiting but for the chance to reach forth a huge and sudden death-grapple.... It is no use! I cannot bring it home to any; nor shall I be better able to convey the frightening sound of the wind, sweeping across these vast, quaking plains—the shrill whispering of the weed-fronds, under the stirring of the winds. To hear it from beyond our canvas screen, is like listening to the uncounted dead of the mighty Sargasso wailing their own requiems. Or again, my fancy, diseased with much loneliness and brooding, likens it to the advancing rustle of armies of the great monsters that are always about us—waiting.

'And so to the coming of this new terror:

'It was in the latter end of October that we first had knowledge of it—a tapping in the night time against the side of the vessel, below the water-line; a noise that came distinct, yet with a ghostly strangeness in the quietness of the night. It was on a Monday night when first I heard it. I was down in the lazarette, overhauling our stores, and suddenly I heard it—tap—tap—tap—against the outside of the vessel upon the starboard side, and below the water-line. I stood for awhile listening; but could not discover what it was that should come a-tapping against our side, away out here in this lonesome world of weed and slime. And then, as I stood there listening, the tapping ceased, and so I waited, wondering, and with a hateful sense of fear, weakening my manhood, and taking the courage out of my heart....

'Abruptly, it recommenced; but now upon the opposite side of the vessel, and as it continued, I fell into a little sweat; for it seemed to me that some foul thing out in the night was tapping for admittance. Tap—tap—tap—it went, and continued, and there I stood listening, and so gripped about with frightened thoughts, that I seemed without power to stir myself; for the spell of the Weed-World, and the fear bred of its hidden terrors and the weight and dreeness of its loneliness have entered into my marrow, so that I could, then and now, believe in the

likelihood of matters which, ashore and in the midst of my fellows, I might laugh at in contempt. It is the dire lonesomeness of this strange world into which I have entered, that serves so to take the heart out of a man.

'And so, as I have said, I stood there listening, and full of frightened, but undefined, thoughts; and all the while tapping continued, sometimes with a regular insistence, and anon with a quick spasmodic tap, tap, tap-a-tap, as though some Thing, having intelligence, signalled to me.

'Presently, however, I shook off something of the foolish fright that had taken me, and moved over to the place from which the tapping seemed to sound. Coming near to it, I bent my head down, close to the side of the vessel, and listened. Thus, I heard the noises with greater plainness, and could distinguish easily, now, that something knocked with a hard object upon the outside of the ship, as though someone had been striking her iron side with a small hammer.

'Then, even as I listened, came a thunderous blow close to my ear, so loud and astonishing, that I leaped sideways in sheer fright. Directly afterwards there came a second heavy blow, and then a third, as though someone had struck the ship's side with a heavy sledge-hammer, and after that, a space of silence, in which I heard my wife's voice at the trap of the lazarette, calling down to me to know what had happened to cause so great a noise.

'"Hush, my dear!" I whispered; for it seemed to me that the thing outside might hear her; though this could not have been possible, and I do but mention it as showing how the noises had set me off my natural balance.

'At my whispered command, my wife turned her about and came down the ladder into the semi-darkness of the place.

'"What is it, Arthur?" she asked coming across to me, and slipping her hand between my arm and side.

'As though in reply to her query, there came against the outside of the ship, a fourth tremendous blow, filling the whole of the lazarette with a dull thunder.

'My wife gave out a frightened cry, and sprang away from me; but the next instant, she was back, and gripping hard at my arm.

'"What is it, Arthur? What is it?" she asked me; her voice, though no more than a frightened whisper, easily heard in the succeeding silence.

'"I don't know, Mary," I replied, trying to speak in a level tone. "It's—"

'"There's something again," she interrupted, as the minor tapping noises recommenced.

'For about a minute, we stood silent, listening to those eerie taps. Then my wife turned to me:

'"Is it anything dangerous, Arthur—tell me? I promise you I shall be brave."

'"I can't possibly say, Mary," I answered. "I can't say; but I'm going up on deck to listen.... Perhaps," I paused a moment to think; but a fifth tremendous blow against the ship's side, drove whatever I was going to say, clean from me, and I could do no more than stand there, frightened and bewildered, listening for further sounds. After a short pause, there came a sixth blow. Then my wife caught me by the arm, and commenced to drag me towards the ladder.

'"Come up out of this dark place, Arthur," she said. "I shall be ill if we stay here any longer. Perhaps the—the thing outside can hear us, and it may stop if we go upstairs."

'By this, my wife was all of a shake, and I but little better, so that I was glad to follow her up the ladder. At the top, we paused for a while to listen, bending down over the open hatchway. A space of, maybe, some five minutes passed away in silence; then there commenced again the tapping noises, the sounds coming clearly up to us where we crouched. Presently, they ceased once more, and after that, though we listened for a further space of some ten minutes, they were not repeated. Neither were there any more of the great bangs.

'In a little, I led my wife away from the hatch, to a seat in the saloon; for the hatch is situated under the saloon table. After that, I returned to the opening and replaced the cover. Then I went into our cabin—the one which had been the Captain's, her father—and brought from there a revolver, of which we have several. This, I loaded with care, and afterwards placed in my side pocket.

'Having done this, I fetched from the pantry, where I have

made it my use to keep such things at hand, a bull's-eye lantern, the same having been used on dark nights when clearing up the ropes from the decks. This, I lit, and afterwards turned the dark-slide to cover the light. Next, I slipped off my boots; and then, as an afterthought, I reached down one of the long-handled American axes from the rack about the mizzenmast—these being keen and very formidable weapons.

'After that, I had to calm my wife and assure her that I would run no unnecessary risks, if, indeed, there were any risks to run; though, as may be imagined, I could not say what new peril might not be upon us. And then, picking up the lantern, I made my way silently on stockinged feet, up the companion-way. I had reached the top, and was just stepping out on the deck, when something caught my arm. I turned swiftly, and perceived that my wife had followed me up the steps, and from the shaking of her hand upon my arm, I gathered that she was very much agitated.

'"Oh, my dear, my dear, don't go! don't go!" she whispered, eagerly. "Wait until it is daylight. Stay below tonight. You don't know what may be about in this horrible place."

'I put the lantern and the axe upon the deck beside the companion; then bent towards the opening, and took her into my arms, soothing her, and stroking her hair; yet with ever an alert glance to and fro along the indistinct decks. Presently, she was more like her usual self, and listened to my reasoning, that she would do better to stay below, and so, in a little, left me, having made me promise afresh that I would be very wary of danger.

'When she had gone, I picked up the lantern and the axe, and made my way cautiously to the side of the vessel. Here, I paused and listened very carefully, being just above that spot upon the port side where I had heard the greater part of the tapping, and all of the heavy bangs; yet, though I listened, as I have said, with much attention, there was no repetition of the sounds.

Presently, I rose and made my way forward to the break of the poop. Here, bending over the rail which ran across, I listened, peering along the dim maindecks; but could neither see nor hear anything; not that, indeed, I had any reason for expecting to see or hear ought unusual *aboard* of the vessel; for

all of the noises had come from over the side, and, more than that, from beneath the water-line. Yet in the state of mind in which I was, I had less use for reason than fancy; for that strange thudding and tapping, out here in the midst of this world of loneliness, had set me vaguely imagining unknowable terrors, stealing upon me from every shadow that lay upon the dimly-seen decks.

'Then, as still I listened, hesitating to go down on to the maindeck, yet too dissatisfied with the result of my peerings, to cease from my search, I heard, faint yet clear in the stillness of the night, the tapping noises recommence.

'I took my weight from off the rail, and listened; but I could no longer hear them, and at that, I leant forward again over the rail, and peered down on to the maindeck. Immediately, the sounds came once more to me, and I knew now, that they were borne to me by the medium of the rail, which conducted them to me through the iron stanchions by which it is fixed to the vessel.

'At that, I turned and went aft along the poop deck, moving very warily and with quietness. I stopped over the place where first I had heard the louder noises, and stooped, putting my ear against the rail. Here, the sounds came to me with great distinctness.

'For a little, I listened; then stood up, and slid away that part of the tarred canvas-screen which covers the port opening through which we dump our refuse; they being made here for convenience, one upon each side of the vessel. This, I did very silently; then, leaning forward through the opening, I peered down into the dimness of the weed. Even as I did so, I heard plainly below me a heavy thud, muffled and dull by reason of the intervening water, against the iron side of the ship. It seemed to me that there was some disturbance amid the dark, shadowy masses of the weed. Then I had opened the darkslide of my lantern, and sent a clear beam of light down into the blackness. For a brief instant, I thought I perceived a multitude of things moving. Yet, beyond that they were oval in shape, and showed white through the weed fronds, I had no clear conception of anything; for with the flash of the light, they van-

ished, and there lay beneath me only the dark, brown masses of the weed—demurely quiet.

'But an impression they did leave upon my over excited imagination—an impression that might have been due to morbidity, bred of too much loneliness; but nevertheless it seemed to me that I had seen momentarily a multitude of dead white faces, upturned towards me among the meshes of the weed.

'For a little, I leant there, staring down at the circle of illumined weed; yet with my thoughts in such a turmoil of frightened doubts and conjectures, that my physical eyes did but poor work, compared with the orb that looks inward. And through all the chaos of my mind there rose up weird and creepy memories—ghouls, the un-dead. There seemed nothing improbable, in that moment, in associating the terms with the fears that were besetting me. For no man may dare to say what terrors this world holds, until he has become lost to his brother men, amid the unspeakable desolation of the vast and slimy weed-plains of the Sargasso Sea.

'And then, as I leaned there, so foolishly exposing myself to those dangers which I had learnt did truly exist, my eyes caught and subconsciously noted the strange and subtle undulation which always foretells the approach of one of the giant octopi. Instantly, I leapt back, and whipped the tarred canvas-cover across the opening, and so stood alone there in the night, glancing frightenedly before and behind me, the beam from my lamp casting wavering splashes of light to and fro about the decks. And all the time, I was listening—listening; for it seemed to me that some Terror was brooding in the night, that might come upon us at any moment and in some unimagined form.

'Then, across the silence, stole a whisper, and I turned swiftly towards the companionway. My wife was there, and she reached out her arms to me, begging me to come below into safety. As the light from my lantern flashed upon her, I saw that she had a revolver in her right hand, and at that, I asked her what she had it for; whereupon she informed me that she had been watching over me, through the whole of the time that I had been on deck, save for the little while that it had taken her to get and load the weapon.

'At that, as may be imagined, I went and embraced her very

heartily, kissing her for the love that had prompted her actions; and then, after that, we spoke a little together in low tones—she asking that I should come down and fasten up the companion-doors, and I demurring, telling her that I felt too unsettled to sleep; but would rather keep watch about the poop for a while longer.

'Then, even as we discussed the matter, I motioned to her for quietness. In the succeeding silence, she heard it, as well as I, a slow—tap! tap! tap! coming steadily along the dark maindecks. I felt a swift vile fear, and my wife's hold upon me became very tense, despite that she trembled a little. I released her grip from my arm, and made to go towards the break of the poop; but she was after me instantly, praying me at least to stay where I was, if I would not go below.

'Upon that, I bade her very sternly to release me, and go down into the cabin; though all the while I loved her for her solicitude. But she disobeyed me, asserting very stoutly, though in a whisper, that if I went into danger, she would go with me; and at that I hesitated; but decided, after a moment, to go no further than the break of the poop, and not to venture on to the maindeck.

'I went very silently to the break, and my wife followed me. From the rail across the break, I shone the light of the lantern; but could neither see nor hear anything; for the tapping noise had ceased. Then it recommenced, seeming to have come near to the port side of the stump of the mainmast. I turned the lantern towards it, and, for one brief instant, it seemed to me that I saw something pale, just beyond the brightness of my light. At that, I raised my pistol and fired, and my wife did the same, though without any telling on my part. The noise of the double explosion went very loud and hollow sounding along the decks, and after the echoes had died away, we both of us thought we heard the tapping going away forrard again.

'After that, we stayed awhile, listening and watching; but all was quiet, and, presently, I consented to go below and bar up the companion, as my wife desired; for, indeed, there was much sense in her plea of the futility of my staying up upon the decks.

'The night passed quietly enough, and on the following morn-

ing, I made a very careful inspection of the vessel, examining the decks, the weed outside of the ship, and the sides of her. After that, I removed the hatches, and went down into the holds; but could nowhere find anything of an unusual nature.

'That night, just as we were making an end of our supper, we heard three tremendous blows given against the starboard side of the ship, whereat I sprang to my feet, seized and lit the dark-lantern, which I had kept handy, and ran quickly and silently up on to the deck. My pistol, I had already in my pocket, and as I had soft slippers upon my feet, I needed not to pause to remove my footgear. In the companionway, I had left the axe, and this I seized as I went up the steps.

'Reaching the deck, I moved over quietly to the side, and slid back the canvas door; then I leant out and opened the slide of the lantern, letting its light play upon the weed in the direction from which the bangs had seemed to proceed; but nowhere could I perceive anything out of the ordinary, the weed seeming undisturbed. And so, after a little, I drew in my head, and slid-to the door in the canvas screen; for it was but wanton folly to stand long exposed to any of the giant octopi that might chance to be prowling near, beneath the curtain of the weed.

'From then, until midnight, I stayed upon the poop, talking much in a quiet voice to my wife, who had followed me up into the companion. At times, we could hear the knocking, sometimes against one side of the ship, and again upon the other. And, between the louder knocks, and accompanying them, would sound the minor tap, tap-a-tap, that I had first heard.

'About midnight, feeling that I could do nothing, and no harm appearing to result to us from the unseen things that seemed to be encircling us, my wife and I made our way below to rest, securely barring the companion-doors behind us.

'It would be, I should imagine, about two o'clock in the morning, that I was aroused from a somewhat troubled sleep, by the agonized screaming of our great boar, away forrard. I leant up upon my elbow, and listened, and so grew speedily wide awake. I sat up, and slid from my bunk to the floor. My wife, as I could tell from her breathing, was sleeping peace-

fully, so that I was able to draw on a few clothes without disturbing her.

'Then, having lit the dark-lantern, and turned the slide over the light, I took the axe in my other hand, and hastened towards the door that gives out on the forrard end of the saloon, on to the maindeck, beneath the shelter of the break of the poop. This door, I had locked before turning-in, and now, very noiselessly, I unlocked it, and turned the handle, opening the door with much caution. I peered out along the dim stretch of the maindeck; but could see nothing; then I turned on the slide of the lamp, and let the light play along the decks; but still nothing unusual was revealed to me.

'Away forrard, the shrieking of the pig had been succeeded by an absolute silence, and there was nowhere any noise, except an occasional odd tap-a-tap, which seemed to come from the side of the ship. And so, taking hold of my courage, I stepped out on to the maindeck, and proceeded slowly forrard, throwing the beam of light to and fro continuously, as I walked.

'Abruptly, I heard away in the bows of the ship a sudden multitudinous tapping and scraping and slithering; and so loud and near did it sound, that I was brought up all of a round-turn, as the saying is. For, perhaps, a whole minute, I stood there hesitating, and playing the light all about me, not knowing but that some hateful thing might leap upon me from out of the shadows.

'And then, suddenly, I remembered that I had left the door open behind me, that led into the saloon, so that, were there any deadly thing about the decks, it might chance to get in upon my wife and child as they slept. At the thought, I turned and ran swiftly aft again, and in through the door to my cabin. Here, I made sure that all was right with the two sleepers, and after that, I returned to the deck, shutting the door and locking it behind me.

'And now, feeling very lonesome out there upon the dark decks, and cut off in a way from a retreat, I had need of all my manhood to aid me forrard to learn the wherefore of the pig's crying, and the cause of that manifold tapping. Yet go I did, and have some right to be proud of the act; for the dreeness

and lonesomeness and the cold fear of the Weed-World, squeeze the pluck out of one in a very woeful manner.

'As I approached the empty fo'cas'le, I moved with all wariness, swinging the light to and fro, and holding my axe very handily, and the heart within my breast like a shape of water, so in fear was I. Yet, I came at last to the pig-sty, and so discovered a dreadful sight. The pig, a huge boar of twenty-score pounds, had been dragged out on to the deck, and lay before the sty with all his belly ripped up, and stone dead. The iron bars of the sty—great bars they are too—had been torn apart, as though they had been so many straws; and, for the rest, there was a deal of blood both within the sty and upon the decks.

'Yet, I did not stay then to see more; for, all of a sudden, the realization was borne upon me that this was the work of some monstrous thing, which even at that moment might be stealing upon me; and, with the thought, an overwhelming fear leapt upon me, overbearing my courage; so that I turned and ran for the shelter of the saloon. and never stopped until the stout door was locked between me and that which had wrought such destruction upon the pig. And as I stood there, quivering a little with very fright, I kept questioning dumbly as to what manner of wild beast thing it was that could burst asunder iron bars, and rip the life out of a great boar, as though it were no more account than a kitten. And then more vital questions: How did it get aboard, and where had it hidden? And again: *What was it?* And so in this fashion for a good while, until I had grown something more calmed.

'But through all the remainder of that night, I slept not so much as a wink.

'Then in the morning when my wife awoke, I told her of the happenings of the night; whereat she turned very white, and fell to reproaching me for going out at all on to the deck, declaring that I had run needlessly into danger, and that, at least, I should not have left her alone, sleeping in ignorance of what was towards. And after that, she fell into a fit of crying, so that I had some to-do comforting her. Yet, when she had come back to calmness. she was all for accompanying me about the decks, to see by daylight what had indeed befallen in the

night-time. And from this decision, I could not turn her; though I assured her I should have told her nothing, had it not been that I wished to warn her from going to and fro between the saloon and the galley, until I had made a thorough search about the decks. Yet, as I have remarked, I could not turn her from her purpose of accompanying me, and so was forced to let her come, though against my desire.

'We made our way on deck through the door that opens under the break of the poop, my wife carrying her loaded revolver half-clumsily in both hands, whilst I had mine held in my left, and the long-handled axe in my right—holding it very readily.

'On stepping out on to the deck, we closed the door behind us, locking it and removing the key; for we had in mind our sleeping child. Then we went slowly forrard along the decks, glancing about warily. As we came fore-side of the pig-sty, and my wife saw that which lay beyond it, she let out a little exclamation of horror, shuddering at the sight of the mutilated pig, as, indeed, well she might.

'For my part, I said nothing; but glanced with much apprehension about us; feeling a fresh access of fright; for it was very plain to me that the boar had been molested since I had seen it—the head having been torn, with awful might, from the body; and there were, besides, other new and ferocious wounds, one of which had come nigh to severing the poor brute's body in half. All of which was so much additional evidence of the formidable character of the monster, or monstrosity, that had attacked the animal.

'I did not delay by the pig, nor attempt to touch it; but beckoned my wife to follow me up on to the fo'cas'le head. Here, I removed the canvas cover from the small skylight which lights the fo'cas'le beneath; and, after that, I lifted off the heavy top, letting a flood of light down into the gloomy place. Then I leant down into the opening, and peered about; but could discover no signs of any lurking thing, and so returned to the maindeck, and made an entrance into the fo'cas'le through the starboard doorway. And now I made a more minute search; but discovered nothing, beyond the mournful array of sea-chests that had belonged to our dead crew.

'My search concluded, I hastened out from the doleful place, into the daylight, and after that made fast the door again, and saw to it that the one upon the port side was also securely locked. Then I went up again on to the fo'cas'le head, and replaced the skylight-top and the canvas cover, battening the whole down very thoroughly.

'And in this wise, and with an incredible care, did I make my search through the ship, fastening up each place behind me, so that I should be certain that no Thing was playing some dread game of hide and seek with me.

'Yet I found *nothing*, and had it not been for the grim evidence of the dead and mutilated boar, I had been like to have thought nothing more dreadful than an over vivid imagination had roamed the decks in the darkness of the past night.

'That I had reason to feel puzzled, may be the better understood, when I explain that I had examined the whole of the great, tarred-canvas screen, which I have built about the ship as a protection against the sudden tentacles of any of the roaming giant octopi, without discovering any torn place such as must have been made if any conceivable monster had climbed aboard out of the weed. Also, it must be borne in mind that the ship stands many feet out of the weed, presenting only her smooth iron sides to anything that desires to climb aboard.

'And yet there was the dead pig, lying brutally torn before its empty sty! And undeniable proof that, to go out upon the decks after dark, was to run the risk of meeting a horrible and mysterious death!

'Through all that day, I pondered over this new fear that had come upon us, and particularly upon the monstrous and unearthly power that had torn apart the stout iron bars of the sty, and so ferociously wrenched off the head of the boar. The result of my pondering was that I removed our sleeping belongings that evening from the cabin to the iron half-deck—a little, four-bunked house, standing fore-side of the stump of the mainmast, and built entirely of iron, even to the single door, which opens out of the after end.

'Along with our sleeping matters, I carried forrard to our new lodgings, a lamp, and oil, also the dark-lantern, a couple of the axes, two rifles, and all of the revolvers, as well as a good supply

of ammunition. Then I bade my wife forage out sufficient provisions to last us for a week, if need be, and whilst she was so busied, I cleaned out and filled the water breaker which belonged to the half-deck.

'At half-past six, I sent my wife forrard to the little iron house, with the baby, and then I locked up the saloon and all of the cabin doors, finally locking after me the heavy, teak door that opened out under the break of the poop.

'Then I went forrard to my wife and child, and shut and bolted the iron door of the half-deck for the night. After that, I went round and saw to it that all of the iron storm-doors, that shut over the eight ports of the house, were in good working order, and so we sat down, as it were, to await the night.

'By eight o'clock, the dusk was upon us, and before half-past, the night hid the decks from my sight. Then I shut down all the iron port-flaps, and screwed them up securely, and after that, I lit the lamp.

'And so a space of waiting ensued, during which I whispered reassuringly to my wife, from time to time, as she looked across at me from her seat beside the sleeping child, with frightened eyes, and a very white face; for somehow there had come upon us within the last hour, a sense of chilly fright, that went straight to one's heart, robbing one vilely of pluck.

'A little later, a sudden sound broke the impressive silence—a sudden dull thud against the side of the ship; and, after that, there came a succession of heavy blows, seeming to be struck all at once upon every side of the vessel; after which there was quietness for maybe a quarter of an hour.

'Then, suddenly, I heard, away forrard, a tap, tap, tap, and then a loud rattling, slurring noise, and a loud crash. After that, I heard many other sounds, and always that tap, tap, tap, repeated a hundred times, as though an army of wooden-legged men were busied all about the decks at the fore end of the ship.

'Presently, there came to me the sound of something coming down the deck, tap, tap, tap, it came. It drew near to the house, paused for nigh a minute; then continued away aft towards the saloon—tap, tap, tap. I shivered a little, and then, fell half consciously to thanking God that I had been given wisdom to

bring my wife and child forrard to the security of the iron deck-house.

'About a minute later, I heard the sound of a heavy blow struck somewhere away aft; and after that a second, and then a third, and seeming by the sounds to have been against iron—the iron of the bulkshead that runs across the break of the poop. There came the noise of a fourth blow, and it blended into the crash of broken woodwork. And therewith, I had a little tense quivering inside me; for the little one and my wife might have been sleeping aft there at that very moment, had it not been for the providential thought which had sent us forrard to the half-deck.

'With the crash of the broken door, away aft, there came, from forrard of us, a great tumult of noises; and, directly, it sounded as though a multitude of wooden-legged men were coming down the decks from forrard. Tap, tap, tap; tap-a-tap, the noises came, and drew abreast of where we sat in the house, crouched and holding our breaths, for fear that we should make some noise to attract THAT which was without. The sounds passed us, and went tapping away aft, and I let out a little breath of sheer easement. Then, as a sudden thought came to me, I rose and turned down the lamp, fearing that some ray from it might be seen from beneath the door. And so, for the space of an hour, we sat wordless, listening to the sounds which came from away aft, the thud of heavy blows, the occasional crash of wood, and, presently the tap, tap, tap, again, coming forrard towards us.

'The sounds came to a stop, opposite the starboard side of the house, and, for a full minute, there was quietness. Then suddenly, "Boom!" a tremendous blow had been struck against the side of the house. My wife gave out a little gasping cry, and there came a second blow; and, at that, the child awoke and began to wail, and my wife was put to it, with trying to soothe her into immediate silence.

'A third blow was struck, filling the little house with a dull thunder of sound, and then I heard the tap, tap, tap, move round to the after end of the house. There came a pause, and then a great blow right upon the door. I grasped the rifle, which I had leant against my chair, and stood up; for I did not know

but that the thing might be upon us in a moment, so prodigious was the force of the blows it struck. Once again it struck the door, and after that went tap, tap, tap, round to the port side of the house, and there struck the house again; but now I had more ease of mind; for it was its direct attack upon the door, that had put such horrid dread into my heart.

'After the blows upon the port side of the house, there came a long spell of silence, as though the thing outside were listening; but, by the mercy of God, my wife had been able to soothe the child, so that no sound from us, told of our presence.

'Then, at last, there came again the sounds—tap, tap, tap, as the voiceless thing moved away forrard. Presently, I heard the noises cease aft; and, after that, there came a multitudinous tap-a-tapping, coming along the decks. It passed the house without so much as a pause, and receded away forrard.

'For a space of over two hours, there was an absolute silence; so that I judged that we were now no longer in danger of being molested. An hour later, I whispered to my wife; but, getting no reply, knew that she had fallen into a doze, and so I sat on, listening tensely; yet making no sort of noise that might attract attention.

'Presently, by the thin line of light from beneath the door, I saw that the day was breaking; and, at that, I rose stiffly, and commenced to unscrew the iron port-covers. I unscrewed the forrard ones first, and looked out into the wan dawn; but could discover nothing unusual about so much of the decks as I could see from there.

'After that, I went round and opened each, as I came to it, in its turn; but it was not until I had uncovered the port which gave me a view of the port side of the after maindeck, that I discovered anything extraordinary. Then I saw, at first dimly, but more clearly as the day brightened, that the door, leading from beneath the break of the poop into the saloon, had been broken to flinders, some of which lay scattered upon the deck, and some of which still hung from the bent hinges; whilst more, no doubt, were strewed in the passage beyond my sight.

'Turning from the port, I glanced towards my wife, and saw that she lay half in and half out of the baby's bunk, sleeping with her head beside the child's both upon one pillow. At the

sight, a great wave of thankfulness took me, that we had been so wonderfully spared from the terrible and mysterious danger that had stalked the decks in the darkness of the preceding night. Feeling thus, I stole across the floor of the house, and kissed them both very gently, being full of tenderness, yet not minded to waken them. And, after that, I lay down in one of the bunks, and slept until the sun was high in the heaven.

'When I awoke, my wife was about and had tended to the child and prepared our breakfast, so that I had naught to do but to tumble out and set to, the which I did with a certain keenness of appetite, induced, I doubt not, by stress of the night. Whilst we ate, we discussed the peril through which we had just passed; but without coming any the nearer to a solution of the weird mystery of the Terror.

'Breakfast over, we took a long and final survey of the decks, from the various ports, and then prepared to sally out. This we did with instinctive caution and quietness, both of us armed as on the previous day. The door of the half-deck we closed and locked behind us, thereby ensuring that the child was open to no danger whilst we were in other parts of the ship.

'After a quick look about us, we proceeded aft towards the shattered door beneath the break of the poop. At the doorway, we stopped, not so much with the intent to examine the broken door, as because of an instinctive and natural hesitation to go forward into the saloon, which but a few hours previous had been visited by some incredible monster or monsters. Finally, we decided to go up upon the poop and peer down through the skylight. This we did, lifting the sides of the dome for that purpose; yet though we peered long and earnestly, we could perceive no signs of any lurking thing. But broken woodwork there appeared to be in plenty, to judge by the scattered pieces.

'After that, I unlocked the companion, and pushed back the big, over-arching slide. Then, silently, we stole down the steps and into the saloon. Here, being now able to see the big cabin through all its length, we discovered a most extraordinary scene; the whole place appeared to be wrecked from end to end; the six cabins that line each side had their bulksheading driven into shards and slivers of broken wood in places. Here, a door would be standing untouched, whilst the bulkshead beside it

was in a mass of flinders— There, a door would be driven completely from its hinges, whilst the surrounding woodwork was untouched. And so it was, wherever we looked.

'My wife made to go towards our cabin; but I pulled her back, and went forward myself. Here the desolation was almost as great. My wife's bunk-board had been ripped out, whilst the supporting side-batten of mine had been plucked forth, so that all the bottom-boards of the bunk had descended to the floor in a cascade.

'But it was neither of these things that touched us so sharply, as the fact that the child's little swing cot had been wrenched from its standards, and flung in a tangled mass of white-painted iron-work across the cabin. At the sight of that, I glanced across at my wife, and she at me, her face grown very white. Then down she slid to her knees, and fell to crying and thanking God together, so that I found myself beside her in a moment, with a very humble and thankful heart.

'Presently, when we were more controlled, we left the cabin, and finished our search. The pantry, we discovered to be entirely untouched, which, somehow, I do not think was then a matter of great surprise to me; for I had ever a feeling that the things which had broken a way into our sleeping cabin, had been looking for us.

'In a little while, we left the wrecked saloon and cabins, and made our way forrard to the pig-sty; for I was anxious to see whether the carcass of the pig had been touched. As we came round the corner of the sty, I uttered a great cry; for there, lying upon the deck, on its back, was a gigantic crab, so vast in size that I had not conceived so huge a monster existed. Brown it was in colour, save for the belly part, which was of a light yellow.

'One of its pincer-claws, or mandibles, had been torn off in the fight in which it must have been slain (for it was all disembowelled). And this one claw weighed so heavy that I had some to-do to lift it from the deck; and by this you may have some idea of the size and formidableness of the creature itself.

'Around the great crab, lay half a dozen smaller ones, no more than from seven or eight to twenty inches across, and all white in colour, save for an occasional mottling of brown. These

had all been killed by a single nip of an enormous mandible, which had in every case smashed them almost into two halves. Of the carcass of the great boar, not a fragment remained.

'And so was the mystery solved; and, with the solution, departed the superstitious terror which had suffocated me through those three nights, since the tapping had commenced. We had been attacked by a wandering shoal of giant crabs, which, it is quite possible, roam across the weed from place to place, devouring aught that comes in their path.

'Whether they had ever boarded a ship before, and so, perhaps, developed a monstrous lust for human flesh, or whether their attack had been prompted by curiosity, I cannot possibly say. It may be that, at first, they mistook the hull of the vessel for the body of some dead marine monster, and hence their blows upon her sides, by which, possibly, they were endeavouring to pierce through our somewhat unusually tough hide!

'Or, again, it may be that they have some power of scent, by means of which they were able to smell our presence aboard the ship; but this (as they made no general attack upon us in the deckhouse) I feel disinclined to regard as probable. And yet—I do not know. Why their attack upon the saloon, and our sleeping-cabin? As I say, I cannot tell, and so must leave it there.

'The way in which they came aboard, I discovered that same day; for, having learned what manner of creature it was that had attacked us, I made a more intelligent survey of the sides of the ship; but it was not until I came to the extreme bows, that I saw how they had managed. Here, I found that some of the gear of the broken bowsprit and jibboom, trailed down on to the weed, and as I had not extended the canvas-screen across the heel of the bowsprit, the monsters had been able to climb up the gear, and thence aboard, without the least obstruction being opposed to their progress.

'This state of affairs, I very speedily remedied; for, with a few strokes of my axe, I cut through the gear, allowing it to drop among the weed; and, after that, I built a temporary breastwork of wood across the gap, between the two ends of the screen; later on making it more permanent.

'Since that time, we have been no more molested by the giant

crabs; though for several nights afterward we heard them knocking strangely against our sides. Maybe, they are attracted by such refuse as we are forced to dump overboard, and this would explain their first tappings being aft, opposite to the lazarette; for it is from the openings in this part of the canvas-screen that we cast our rubbish.

'Yet, it is weeks now since we heard aught of them, so that I have reason to believe that they have betaken themselves elsewhere, maybe to attack some other lonely humans, living out their short span of life aboard some lone derelict, lost even to memory in the depth of this vast sea of weed and deadly creatures.

'I shall send this message forth on its journey, as I have sent the other four, within a well-pitched barrel, attached to a small fire balloon. Should this message ever fall into human hands, let them try to imagine the size of the other crab or crabs that could destroy so formidable a creature as the one we found.

'What other terrors does this hideous world hold for us?

'I had thought of enclosing the shell of one of the white smaller crabs. It must have been some of these moving in the weed that night, that set my disordered fancy to imagining of ghouls and the Un-Dead. But, on thinking it over, I shall not; for to do so would be to illustrate nothing that needs illustration, and it would but increase needlessly the weight which the balloon will have to lift.

'And so I grow wearied of writing. The night is drawing near, and I have little more to tell. I am writing this in the saloon, and, though I have mended and carpentered so well as I am able, nothing I can do will hide the traces of that night when the vast crabs raided through these cabins, searching for—WHAT?

'There is nothing more to say. In health, I am well, and so is my wife and the little one, but ...

'I must have myself under control, and be patient. We are beyond all help, and must bear that which is before us, with such bravery as we are able. And with this, I end; for my last word shall not be one of complaint.

'ARTHUR SAMUEL PHILIPS.'

'Christmas Eve, 1879.'

Benjamin's Shadow

by

MICHAEL SIMS

As always, it is a pleasure to introduce a new writer. Michael Sims, born in London in 1952, works in the prosaic surroundings of a bank and writes in his spare time. Though he says he usually throws the results away in disgust, he managed to refrain from destroying 'Benjamin's Shadow' which is good news for macabre fiction enthusiasts. This is his first story to be published anywhere and I think it shows considerable promise. See if you agree.

Although it is true to say that I knew Molly Brown, I could not in all honesty say that I knew her well. I met her on perhaps six occasions, and on each of those my natural shyness prevented any memorable conversation between us. I was therefore surprised when I received a letter from her solicitors urging me to attend their office in all haste, as the poor lady had passed away. I was naturally sorry to hear that she had died, but I was at a loss to see why the fact should have special interest for me. I was soon to find out.

'Her whole estate! I don't believe it, why me?'

'Mr Gibbs, you probably knew Miss Brown better than anyone else.'

'But I only met her a few times, and then only to pass the time of day.'

'Please let me finish, Mr Gibbs; though it may be true that you regarded Miss Brown as no more than a passing acquaintance, she obviously had a great deal of affection for you. I have seen this situation on several occasions. You see, Miss Brown was a very lonely woman; she had no family, no friends, and

the kindness you showed obviously meant a great deal to her. She was too level-headed a person to attach any romantic connections to your actions, and so she has repaid you in the only way she could.'

'Yes, but her whole estate, I mean, how much does that actually cover?'

'In terms of cash, I cannot yet give you a definite figure, but I don't think you will have many financial worries any more.'

I sat back and stared at the small bald-headed man who, at that moment, I regarded as my angel of mercy. No, that was not quite right, the eccentric Miss Brown was my true spirit of kindness. To leave me an inheritance because I wasn't rude to her, it just didn't seem natural. Surely there had to be a catch.

'There is just one technicality, Mr Gibbs,' said the solicitor. 'Miss Brown owned a house in Cornwall, a large old mansion surrounded by several acres. It was here that Miss Brown passed away, and it was her express wish that you should live in the house and maintain it in good living order.'

But that would mean uprooting everything; my job, house, friends—all the life I know.'

'Miss Brown's wish is quite explicit. Let me read her own words. "If the heir to my worldly possessions is to benefit from them, and is to achieve the pleasure from them that I on occasion found, then he is, without question, to remain in residence on my estate until his death." I am afraid, Mr Gibbs, that if you wish to inherit Miss Brown's fortune, then you must live in her house in Cornwall. I have a letter here, unopened, that you are not to read until you have slept one night there. I believe she named the place; where is it, ah yes, the house is called *Benjamin's Shadow*. A strange name.'

So that is how I came to be sitting on a train speeding towards Cornwall, and that strangely named house that was to become my home.

I dislike all travel but if it is forced upon me I would choose rail any time. I soon grew tired of the book I had brought along to read, and my thoughts turned to the will and Miss Brown's

reasons for leaving me such wealth. The legal jargon of the document was explicit only in her desire that I should live in the house. I still wanted to know why. I felt in my pocket for the sealed letter. There, surely, must lie the answer; Miss Brown was too straightforward a person to leave such a loose end for me to puzzle over.

On the envelope were the instructions for when and where I should open it. I could not wait. Almost guiltily I tore open the seal and pulled out the single folded sheet. I flattened it out to reveal, in a scrawled and weak handwriting, the following message:

'Dear Mr Gibbs,

When you read this you will have seen the house, and indeed you will already have spent one night alone with its silence.

You will notice that I call it "the house" for I have never felt it to be mine despite the many years I have spent there. You will have thought me a lonely old woman, and for the most part I was, but there were times when I screamed *to be left alone*. Many were the occasions when I knew I was not alone, but that there were *others* in the house. You see I was not the first owner.

I expect now you will think me a foolish old woman, or perhaps suspect that I was more than foolish. The loneliness of the house can have a strange effect, but I think you will find the companionship a sight worse.

No doubt you will wonder why I have left you such a colossal fortune? Of the few people I knew, Mr Gibbs, you were the only one to treat me as a person and not as a lonely old fool. That is why I have left you my money. I have left you the house because I think you are strong in both mind and body. If I am right you will enjoy living there.

May God's blessings be with you.'

There the letter ended, with an illegible signature underneath. I was none the wiser after I had read it a second time. I did not like to admit it but I could only come to the conclusion that her lonely existence had affected her mind. The letter was a jumble which made no sense. I drifted off into a series of

thoughts regarding the life I had known and the life before me, which eventually were interrupted by the slowing of the train.

The train pulled into Middleham Station and stopped amidst a rush of hissing steam. I noticed with curiosity as I stepped on to the station platform that only one carriage door was slammed shut, and that was mine.

Here I was then. The ticket-collector wished me good day and I walked out of the station.

From the outside, the quaint old station looked a haven of peace. Painted in green and cream, it melted into the fields surrounding it as though it had itself grown out of the ground. Even the column of steam from the shunting engine seemed to blend in with the sun-drenched countryside. The blue smoke wafted upwards to soak into the clear blue sky above, while in the distance a flight of birds flew across the horizon in perfect formation. The air was still and heavy, the sun hot. I removed my jacket and loosened my tie; summer in the country is vastly different from summer in the city.

I had no idea where *Benjamin's Shadow* was, as the solicitors had only told me the name of the village. The main street ran up a slight hill, and was bordered on either side by shops. I decided to ask in one of them the whereabouts of my inherited property. By luck the first shop I passed was the post office. They would surely be able to tell me where my house was, especially if it was as large as I had been led to believe. I went in and found it empty of customers. After a while a woman appeared and apologized for keeping me waiting.

'That's quite all right,' I replied. 'I wonder if you could help me. I am looking for a house called *Benjamin's Shadow*. Do you know where it is?'

She was a small middle-aged woman with a permanent wave in her grey hair. She adjusted her spectacles before answering.

'I know *Benjamin's Shadow*,' she said curtly.

'Do you think you could tell me where it is?' I persisted.

'If you really want to know, I will tell you, but if you had any sense you would not venture near there.'

'Look, I'm sorry, I just don't understand. I have inherited the house from a friend. I am going to live there. I have some of my belongings,' I indicated my suitcases, 'and the rest are to follow

later. I really only want to know where I can find it.' I looked firmly at the woman, who, I noticed, had a slight twitch at the corner of her mouth. She sighed, as though faced with the inevitable.

'If you walk through the wood, past the church, and then turn left over the bridge, the house will be facing you. Good day.'

She returned to her back room before I could thank her, and I was left in the dusty shop alone. Much confused, I walked back down the road and entered the wood.

The sheer contrast between life in the city and that of the country is never more vividly illustrated than when one enters a wood. In the city you look up and see the sky threatened by concrete offices, blocks of flats. You walk on paved floors, on asphalt roads; the natural life is restricted to the parks, and even there it is fenced in, cut off from everyday life, and policed by forbidding notices. In the country the true feeling of life is born anew. The grass is soft and springy to walk upon, with fields and meadows free to spread themselves over the earth.

As I walked through the wood I looked up as the sun glinted through a large poplar tree, sending speckled refractions of itself colliding and spinning into my eyes. My existence at my new home promised to be a lonely one, and I felt more than a twinge of regret at having left my comfortable life in London for the unknown qualities of a country estate.

Very soon I had left the wood behind, and saw before me the church the woman had mentioned. In the churchyard was a man. Slowly, deliberately, he dug a spade into the ground before removing yet another pile of earth. This he threw over his shoulder on to the growing heap behind him. He was digging a grave. As I approached he stopped, stood upright, and leaned on his spade. He greeted me with a cursory nod, while I noted with distaste that he had only one eye. His left socket was shoddily sewn together, which gave the impression that he was permanently winking.

'Hello,' I called down to him.

'You'd be from London,' his grin revealed two rows of rotting black teeth, 'I can tell that by the cut of your clothes.' His small gnarled body shook in a childish giggle.

'Yes, I am,' I replied, 'I am going to live in *Benjamin's Shadow*, do you know of it?'

His ugly face grimaced as if I had sworn, and he spat loudly. Without another word he picked up his spade and continued to dig. This display of animal rudeness angered me, but I decided not to persist with him. I walked past the church and very soon came to a bridge. Over that bridge lay my new house. There was a curious detachment in my breast as I trod carefully across the rickety wooden structure. In London it had seemed to be a bold adventure when I, at forty years of age, had resigned from my job, sold my house, and left for an unknown home in Cornwall, but as I stood on the firm earth on the other side of the bridge, I realized that it was not such a drastic change after all. I had never married, my job had become routine, and my social life had no excitement. As I walked along the roughly beaten path which skirted a random clump of trees, I decided that my decision had been the right one. I walked on through the peaceful fields until I saw the tip of a black chimney peep out over a line of larches. I hurried forward as my excitement mounted.

I cannot remember my first thoughts upon seeing the house; I think I was disappointed because it looked so gloomy. Its brickwork was black and grimy, so that it contrasted with the green of the fields under the bright sun. The house was large but not in any way could it be called rambling, for it was a tightly built structure. It was a strange house. I could not help but feel how lonely it looked, and wondered how Miss Brown had endured the isolation, or, indeed, how I would. The house was built symmetrically as a simple square, although the roof was a maze of turrets, gabled windows, and chimneys. The windows were latticed, and, I noticed, curtained. I hoped Miss Brown had left all her furniture as I had not made any plans in that direction.

I walked towards the house in a more sombre mood than I had been in before. Somehow that black house depressed me, or was I perhaps tired from the long journey? I decided that was the real reason for my lack of spirit, and resolved to retire at a reasonable hour that night. As a man of simple habits, I made a scant inspection of the interior that first night ensur-

ing only that each room was furnished. The house on first impression appeared comfortable, and I felt instantly at ease within its walls. My black mood lifted as I made myself some tea from the packet I had had the foresight to bring with me. Isolated though the house was, the necessary energy supplies were sufficient to maintain a civilized level of living. I seated myself in a large armchair by the fireside, and reflected upon the change that had come about my life. The light outside gradually began to fade. I fell asleep.

I slept for several hours until some sound from outside the house woke me. I listened, still half asleep, for the sound to be repeated. Then in the distance I heard it again, a low moaning cry that seemed to float on the wind. It seemed to be the cry of a young animal, perhaps one in pain. Whatever it was it was getting louder, approaching the house. I sat upright in my chair and listened as the sounds grew more frequent. They had almost the sound of sobbing. I got up from my chair and walked slowly to the window. As I looked out into the dark night air I could see nothing. However much I strained my eyes, I could still only see the shadowed outlines of the trees. I noticed that as I looked out of the window the noise had ceased, so with a mental shrug of my shoulders I resumed my previous position with the intention of sleeping again. Before I closed my eyes I glanced back at the window and fright touched my nerve ends. I started back, for on the window ledge outside was a hand. It was a tiny, almost unformed hand of pink flesh, and as I stared, it clasped and unclasped several times as though uncertain of what to do.

As noiselessly as possible, I climbed from my chair and made my way to the window. Yet, even as I stood, the hand seemed to move away. When I reached the window I flung it open to inspect the night outside. The hand had gone. I did not close the window immediately, although there was a definite chill in the air. I had to reassure myself that everything was normal again before I could return to the security of my armchair. My mind baulked at the mere thought of an inspection of the outside of the house, and so, when I had convinced myself that there were no other abnormal things out in the darkness, I shut the window, tightly.

I confess my hands shook as I stood back from the window. I had no way to explain what I had seen. I had never experienced anything like it in my life, and although not unintelligent, I was baffled. I quickly found Miss Brown's small store of alcohol, and after I had drunk two glasses of brandy, my nerves were considerably calmed. In an attempt to be rational I told myself I was tired. I had, after all, awoken from a very deep sleep. My exhaustion was not helped by the occurrence, and no sooner had I again sat in the armchair than I closed my eyes to sleep till morning.

Upon awakening I found I was in a surprisingly cheerful mood, in no way depressed about the happening in the night. I could offer no explanation and so I let the matter rest until events explained themselves. I spent that morning unpacking both my suitcases, after I had decided which bedroom to make my own. By the fresh light of day the inside of the house was cosy, and in every way welcoming. I felt a certain contentment as I roamed through the massive hallways, crossed the balconies, and descended the majestic main staircase. I had visited grand old houses such as these on conducted tours and now I owned one. I decided to visit the village in the afternoon and make arrangements to have provisions brought to the house on a weekly basis.

The walk to the village took me some time as I was in no mood to hurry. Despite her rudeness, I decided the best place to seek advice was from the lady in the post office. As I entered the shop the bell rang on the door, and I heard movement behind the counter. The small woman appeared and her face showed that she remembered who I was. I smiled politely and explained my needs.

'You seem determined to stay,' she said, 'and I can give you no reasonable explanation as to why you shouldn't. There's just some things that people know shouldn't be seen. Call them what you will. I just know that there are stories about that house that I wouldn't tell my children.'

I am afraid my patience was at a loss with the woman, and I was less than polite when I insisted she tell me the name of someone who could deliver my supplies. She shook her head as though defeated but still gave me the name of the village grocer

and directions to find him. I thanked her more warmly than was necessary before I left the shop. I paid a visit to the grocer and came to excellent terms with him. He was to bring my goods every Tuesday to the house, and I would pay for them on delivery. I bought sufficient to last until his first visit, and with these returned home. The day was even warmer than before as I made my way through the shade of the wood. My heart was light, and I think I hummed softly to myself, something I had not done for a long while. Without a doubt country life suited me. The house did not seem so dark or forbidding as it had on the previous day, and as I approached from the side I felt none of the mystery of the night before.

Suddenly I stopped and looked with amazement into the upstairs window which had a view over the church. In that room there was a young couple standing facing each other, and they were arguing fiercely. The man was aged about thirty, dressed in a black frock coat, matching trousers, and a frilled white shirt with black lace tie. His entire outfit was not of this century. He had brown shoulder-length hair and wore gold rimmed spectacles. The girl was slightly younger, shorter, with long dark hair parted simply in the middle, but collected at the back in fussy ringlets. Her full-length dress was also of another century. Obviously from such a distance I could not hear their words, but the girl appeared to be in a violent temper with the man. With a sudden movement she slapped him around the face, whereupon he faded into the air. The girl rocked back and forth, caught in spasms of laughter. The spell broken, I rushed forward. At the door I fumbled for my key. I did not even take the care to shut the door behind me, but threw down my shopping and ran up the stairs to find the intruders. I soon found the room, but when I looked inside there was no sign of any disturbance, or of any young couple. I sat down on the bed and sighed. I am no lover of mystery. If I had seen two people in that room then they had to be in the house somewhere. I took great pains to search every room, but still I found nothing to reveal their entry, or their reason for being in the house.

After a hearty meal, I felt somewhat less depressed, but I was still puzzled, and more than a little disturbed at the events so far. I realized that the woman in the village post office had

not been unfounded in her warning. Indeed, Miss Brown's letter now seemed less strange than it had before. It seemed that there was something strange, something malignant about the house.

Mornings in the house seemed always to be fresh, new and alive. Birds sang in the trees outside, and I myself felt vibrant, alert to the world. One morning, after I had been in the house almost a week, I had taken an early walk around the estate, before I returned to wash and shave. Nearly half my face had been dealt with when my attention was diverted by some movement behind me. I stared into the mirror, then glanced behind, but the bathroom was empty and still. I concentrated on my task once more, only to be distracted again by a disturbance reflected in my shaving mirror. I stared aghast as I realized what the cause of the movement had been. Behind me the very wall of the room was rippling. It was bulging outwards, as though some great force was pressing against it. Terror chilled my body. The wall moved for barely a minute but that was long enough. There was an obscene breathlike quality about its movement, as though the wall had life. Even when the movement had ceased my hands shook so fiercely that I dropped my razor. I held on to the side of the bath for support in the fear that I might faint following this fresh disturbance.

I decided to investigate the wall's construction. After I had finished my shave downstairs in safety, I searched the cellar for some tools, for I intended to remove the plaster if necessary. I soon found a hammer and chisel and returned to the bathroom. My initial inspection of the surface of the wall showed nothing out of the ordinary. It appeared normal in every way. Reluctant though I was, I decided my curiosity had to be relieved, and so I set to work with my tools. Before very long I had made a grisly discovery. Within the wall I found a hollow chamber, measuring about a foot square, and in it I found a human skeleton. It was undoubtedly human, but so tiny that it must have been the bones of a very young child. I had no idea why anyone would wish to wall up such small bones,

when surely they deserved a decent burial. That was exactly what I did with them, after I had poured myself a much needed scotch.

As time passed I grew progressively more depressed in the house. My days were spent moping about, as I idled away the time in the garden, or merely sat reading. Often I toyed with the idea of returning to London, though I knew that it would mean I would have to surrender my inheritance. Something kept me in the house. I seemed to be expecting something to happen, and even though I guessed it would be unpleasant, I had a morbid curiosity to find out what it was.

One evening, nine days after I had broken into the wall, I decided to have a bath. I left the water running while I went to fetch fresh towels. When I returned I stared into the bath, sick with fright. The water had turned into thick red blood, which still gushed from the tap. Overcome with nausea, I turned off the immediate flow, while I tried to reason out an answer. The room was silent save for the occasional drop of blood that still dripped from the tap. The obvious answer was that there was something in the supply tank in the loft. Whatever it was I did not care to think, but I knew I had to find out.

After a frantic search for a ladder, I entered the loft armed only with a powerful battery torch. With care to tread on the rafters, I made my way hesitantly towards the large water tank. I feared to look inside in dread of what I might find. My mind still bore the scars from the sight of that bath full of blood. I pulled aside the covering on the tank and immediately shone my torch inside, fearful lest some creature should leap out upon me. I was unashamedly relieved to find nothing out of the ordinary. The mystery of the blood still remained, but for the moment I was happy to be faced with a mystery than a more solid adversary. I replaced the lid on the tank, and descended the ladder. I proceeded to empty the bath of its contents. The blood was thick and slow to drain away, and I did not relish the task of washing the enamel sides clean of all traces of the obnoxious liquid. I spent the rest of the day

quietly sunning myself in front of the house.

It was perhaps two weeks before the next strange occurrence took place, and that proved to be the final one. I had spent a long tiring day in the fields, digging a vegetable patch that I intended to cultivate. The grocer had delivered my regular supply of foodstuffs, and after a full dinner I had prepared for an early night. I read until my eyes would not stay open any longer. Then I turned out the light and tried to sleep. I must have dozed off, though I tossed and turned, unable to sleep peacefully. Eventually I awoke thoroughly unrefreshed, my mind in turmoil. I was in a void between conscious waking, and the unconsciousness of sleep. Outside my window the trees creaked and moaned as if they strained to reach the house, or to get away. I listened, and as I did so the wind became a curious ripple of laughter, rushing through the branches. I sat up in bed, my mind active. There was a definite peal of devilish laughter in the air outside. Objects rattled against the window pane. I got out of bed, put on my dressing-gown and slippers and went across to the window. It was black outside, though I could see the shadows of the trees dancing in the laughing wind. Only half aware of my actions, I ran downstairs, and out into the cold night air.

It was as though I had entered a nightmare world of unreality. Unseen creatures laughed in my ears. I found myself running around in circles on the wet grass, my eyes blurred by the blinding rain. My thoughts were in chaos. The trees were alive, swaying above my head with monstrous intent. An icy blast swirled around me sweeping my hair over my face, clutching and pulling at my garments. I found myself being pulled along by the rushing wind, while my arms flapped helplessly against my side. Round and round I was pulled until finally I slumped to the ground, exhausted. My mind entered the realms of unconsciousness, and as I fell asleep I heard the wind, with a satisfied murmur, enter the house.

I woke with the dampness of the early morning dew covering my body. I felt cold and stiff as I stood up. I looked around, and saw that I had travelled a long way from the house. Looking down at my feet I saw that I had slept upon a concealed concrete slab that had been embedded in the earth. I bent down

to inspect it, because I saw that there was writing carved into the surface. With disgust I realized that I had spent the night upon a grave, for the words read: 'Here lie the bodies of Douglas and Christine Harris. May their tormented souls rest in peace.' My thoughts were less confused as I walked towards the house. I had been meant to see that grave. I began to realize what had happened. As I entered the house that morning, I felt the presence of something near. Something was within me. I began to feel weak, incredibly tired. I went over to the mirror to look at my face, and as I did so I realized.

I realize now as I look into the gilt-edged mirror that hangs on my living-room wall. I look into the mirror and see the years peeling away from my features. Once forty, I am now thirty-five, thirty-four. As I stand here I grow younger. Wrinkles fade, and hair grows darker, thicker; back into the style I wore when I was twenty-two. Soon that face is gone, and I see my adolescence return in reverse. It is obvious I cannot stand here watching myself become young again, and so I climb the stairs to my bedroom. My clothes hang loosely from my immature body, but I will soon be in bed, and once there I can dream. As I lay beneath the sheets I curl my legs up against my chest and grip them with my arms. It seems the natural thing to do. As I close my eyes I feel at peace. I will sleep easily for now I know. I am the darkness that lurks in the corner of each room. I am the soft wind that ghosts through the silent house. I am Benjamin's Shadow.

The Final Trick

by

JOHN BLACKBURN

I was fortunate last year to be able to introduce John Blackburn, our leading horror novel writer, in his anthology début, and I am fortunate again to be able to include him in this particular volume.

John Blackburn, described as today's master of horror, was an antiquarian bookseller when he published his first novel, A Scent of New-Mown Hay *(1958) which was an immediate success. Since then he has produced on average a novel a year, ranging from crime and mystery to historical fiction, and from spy thriller to gruesome horror. He has also covered an interesting range of subjects, including the Wandering Jew, Elizabeth Bathory, Jesus and the Black Death!*

'The Final Trick' has all John Blackburn's trade marks: neat plot, good writing, interesting characterization—and a beautiful sting in the tail.

At what point does a heavy drinker become an alcoholic? What turns a man who enjoys a mild flutter into a compulsive gambler? What is the borderline between religious fervour and murderous fanaticism?

I don't know the answers, but after hearing that Tom Beck had died of a brain tumour, I can describe a similar change. An obsessive hobby which led to mania.

I first met Sir Thomas Beck in a suburban railway compartment where he was demonstrating the five card trick, or the Vanishing Queens as it's sometimes called, to a couple of cronies. His friends were puzzled, though not really impressed, and I'm a pro. After they left the train at the next station and

we were alone, I introduced myself and told him how he could have improved the deception and knocked 'em cold.

'Rhodes ... Gerald Rhodes, the *Maestro?*' Beck didn't believe me at first, which wasn't surprising, because I hadn't been on a stage for years. Not since that car accident which ended my career and ruined my appearance. My right hand is partly paralysed, I can't even shuffle a pack and, although the plastic surgeon worked hard on my face, it still resembles a weather-worn gargoyle.

'Gerry Rhodes, the Master!' I had produced a visiting card and the selection of press clippings I always carry and Sir Thomas' well-manicured hand reached out and squeezed my maimed one. 'An honour, Mr Rhodes ... perhaps the greatest honour of my life.'

A flamboyant statement, but his expression showed it was genuine and I warmed towards him. Most people had forgotten me, but apparently I'd one fan left; an extremely useful fan.

He gave me a visiting card of his own and my feelings became even warmer. Sir Thomas Beck was a millionaire with business interests ranging from shipping to chemicals and just the kind of pal I needed. The compensation I'd received for my road injuries had been spent or unwisely invested and lean times were looming.

'Yes, a very great honour, Mr Rhodes, because you were undoubtedly one of the finest illusionists in the world. No, not *one* of them ... the very finest ... the master. I'll never forget that performance at the Scala in forty-nine when you did ...'

What I'd done was an Indian rope act which a Pole called 'The Warsaw Wizard' had perfected in the nineteenth century, but I didn't tell Sir Thomas that. I basked in his praise, because he'd followed my career avidly and had been broken-hearted when I retired. He also envied me, which was a strange and rather frightening thing. A healthy, middle-aged millionaire, envying an old, crippled, pitiful out-of-work conjurer.

But Tom Beck was pitiful, too. He'd made a pile of money, he had every material possession a man could ask for, but he'd failed in the one thing he craved. He wanted to be a top class illusionist and he hadn't a chance in hell.

It was that ambition which brought us together and created

a sort of friendship, and I will say that I did my best to help him. Tom hired me as his teacher and I taught him everything I knew. We had long sessions at his penthouse in Mayfair. Weekends on the yacht anchored off Cowes, and a full week in the Dorset manor house. I showed Tommy Beck every trick in the trade, but it was no good, and I'll explain why.

Almost every member of an audience knows how a girl is sawn in half or an actor guillotined, but it's the presentation that rouses them. The illusionist must have hypnotic qualities so that they actually feel the saw ripping flesh and hear the thud of a blade slicing bone.

Tom Beck lacked those qualities; he could never hold an audience of mentally defective school children and he also lacked imagination. His own inventions were second-hand variations and they bored me stiff.

Card tricks and tricks with matches. Phoney water-divining rods activated by springs and rubber bands. Magic spectacles which enabled him to read a message through a sealed envelope. Cigarettes which vanished from the case when you reached for one. Deceptions produced by mirrors and elaborate electric gadgets. Tom's repertoire was as far-flung as his business empire, but nothing came off.

'Sorry, Gerry,' he said, standing beside a billiard table in the Mayfair flat. I'd tried not to stifle a yawn, though it was obvious that the uncannily obedient snooker balls had metal cores and were guided by magnets. 'I know that you find my hobby tedious and I've never deceived you for more than ten minutes on any occasion.'

Ten minutes! Poor Tom was overestimating. Five was the maximum extent of my bewilderment, but I didn't contradict him. He was paying me and he was desperately unhappy. Though his face was bent over the green baize table top, I could sense his misery like a physical presence. A rich, successful man, but an artist *manqué*. A visionary with a dream that would never be fulfilled.

'Yes, I'm very sorry,' he repeated. 'I have disappointed a great teacher and wasted a professional's time. I'm a dud, Gerry, but while there's life there's hope and I'm going to make you a promise.' He turned and stared me in the eyes and his

own eyes were so intense that I knew he was not quite sane. 'You have my solemn word that one day ... maybe in a month or a year or a decade, I shall perform a trick which will leave you gasping.'

That was the last time I saw Tom Beck in England. He sold his Dorset estate, leased the penthouse to an American chain store tycoon, and the yacht carried him off to fresh fields and pastures new. I didn't hear which pastures; I never heard a word about him or received one from him for ages. I'd almost forgotten my inept pupil when the letter arrived.

The thick glossy notepaper had a Moroccan address printed in gold type, and the message was brief. 'Please come, *Maestro*. The disciple awaits your judgement.' That was all Tom wrote, but the envelope also contained a timetable of flights to Tangiers and a cheque to cover my fares and expenses. A sizeable cheque and very welcome, because I was almost on my beam-ends. In less than an hour I had packed a case and taken a taxi to London airport.

Morocco hadn't gained full independence then, and Tangiers was still an open city. A haven for smugglers and crooks and perverts where you could buy and sell anything. A block of gold, enough heroin to hook a thousand hippies and keep 'em hooked; a slave, male or female, according to your taste.

A fascinating town, but I didn't see much of it. Tom had received my telegram and was waiting to greet me and see that there were no tiresome delays. I was waved through the customs by smirking officials and led to a Rolls Corniche with a uniformed chauffeur standing to attention by the rear door.

Nor did I see much of the countryside during the journey. The chauffeur drove like a bat out of hell and Tom was full of chatter and enquiries about my health and happiness and this, that, and the other. Before I knew it, we had drawn up before a vast Moorish palace surrounded by fountains and palm trees, and a bevy of flunkies hurried across a courtyard to welcome us. Tom said he'd leave me till dinner and I was handed over to two stout coppery-coloured characters whom I suspected were eunuchs. They washed me and shaved me and dressed me in a suit Tom had had made to my measurements and then ushered me into a banqueting hall that resembled an interior

set for a film about the Fall of Babylon—a big budget film.

I can't recall what Tom Beck and I ate and drank during the meal. There were a lot of courses and a lot of drinks. They were all delicious, but the entertainment which followed makes the memory hazy. I was feeling on top of the world when a turbanned butler poured out the brandy and Tom lit my cigar with a gold lighter.

'It's a long time since we met, *Maestro*,' he said, his nose sniffing the liqueur before he tasted it. 'That unfortunate evening when I tried to impress you with the billiard balls and failed so miserably.

'Two—three—no, almost four years ago. I hope you've forgiven me those amateurish attempts at magic, but I also hope that you haven't forgotten my promise.' He eased back his chair and stood up. 'A promise that I am ready to keep, if you are interested.'

'Of course, I'm interested.' The butler had opened the door and I followed Tom down a corridor to another room; a small theatre with a raised dais screened by curtains. I felt sure I was in for another boring piece of second-hand amateurism, but I didn't care. Tom Beck had wined and dined me like a prince and I had taken the brandy glass along to keep me company. I was replete with food and drink and ready for anything. I was also in Tom's power and he was a dangerous man. That's why I never told this story till I heard he was dead. If he'd produced a rabbit from a hat, I'd have applauded and said he was a greater showman than Houdini.

'Sit down and make yourself comfortable, Gerry.' He motioned me to a chair before the dais and stationed himself at a control panel. 'This is my swansong ... my final effort, and all I ask for is your honest opinion.' He pressed a switch, the curtains parted and I saw a red-carpeted stage and the biggest human being I'd ever set eyes on.

The man was enormous. A gigantic, coal-black negro who must have topped seven foot, but so broad that he looked squat, though there was no surplus fat on him. His body rippled with muscle, his only clothing was a loin cloth and a gleaming, crescent-shaped scimitar dangled from his right fist.

'I have named my act The Moth and the Flame, Gerry, and that is the Flame.' Tom clapped his hands and the man raised the sword in salute. 'Now for the other member of the team; the Moth.' He clapped again and a girl appeared from the left wing. A naked girl, a white girl, a very beautiful girl.

Also a drugged girl. The dazed, crazy eyes and the unnatural, jerky movements of her slim, tense limbs told me she was doped, though don't ask me what the drug was. Coke or morphine or L.S.D. I've never touched the stuff, but Tommy Beck was an industrial chemist who knew his business. He'd given his moth a shot of mainliner to provide Dutch courage. A lot of courage, and it was certainly needed.

The Moth was young; a teenage child, but she capered up to that vast, black giant and she was quite fearless as she danced around him, though there was plenty to frighten her. The long, gleaming sword flailed at her skull and she ducked under it. The blade swung to rip open her stomach and she sprang back with a giggle of triumph and half an inch to spare. Again and again the blows were avoided and as the dance continued, I began to be bored. Tommy Beck had hired two skilled acrobats and I'd seen similar shows in a dozen night clubs. The sword thrusts were deliberately misaimed, and I was about to take a sip of brandy when the glass fell from my hand.

Something else had fallen, because the scimitar had found its target at last. The little girl's head had bounced on to the carpet and her body was crumpling. Before the stage darkened, I distinctly saw blood spurt from the severed neck.

'My sincere congratulations, Tom.' The lights had come on again and I knew that I'd witnessed one of the cleverest illusions of all time. No one had died and the actor and actress were taking their bows. The negro with his sword lowered and the girl at his side.

The same girl. Definitely the same, though I'd been sure he'd killed her. The same fair hair, the same facial features, the same immature breasts. The same belly and buttocks and thighs. Sir Thomas Beck had succeeded at last. He'd worked a miracle and my voice was reverent. 'How the hell did you do it? Mirrors or

a film projector or ...?' The girl's eyes were still dazed and I became suspicious. Was I also under the influence of drugs? Had he hypnotized me?

'Of course not, *cher maître*.' I had accused him and Beck left the switchboard and sat down in a chair at my side. 'There is nothing wrong with your brain and no complicated apparatus was used to deceive you. Only money was required, though quite a tidy sum of money.' I couldn't see his face, but I knew he was smiling. 'One has to pay good money for rarities ... collectors' pieces.' He pointed at the bowing girl and I saw that she was standing on a damp patch of carpet.

'Yes, Gerry,' Tom Beck said. 'I had to fork out to honour my promise ... to buy a pair of identical twins.'

The Queen of Beauty

by

E. H. VISIAK

Poet, philosopher and commentator on Milton, E. H. Visiak (1878-1972) was one of our most under-rated writers. His early career was spent with the Indo-European Telegraph Company, during which time he published his first book of poetry, Buccaneer Ballads *(1910). In 1914, as a conscientious objector, he became a schoolmaster and taught in both Britain and Sweden. He then took up writing and scholarship as a full-time occupation and distinguished himself as a poet, novelist and a unique authority on Milton.*

Apart from his poetry and other works, Visiak found an enduring fame for his classic novel Medusa *(1929). When it first appeared, it was an unregarded failure, due in no small measure to a scathing review by* The Times; *it is ironic that the same paper described the novel over forty years later in Visiak's obituary as 'a tour-de-force'. Visiak also wrote a lesser known but equally worthy book along the same lines called* The Haunted Island *(1910).*

Visiak's last years were spent in a rest home in Hove, surrounded by his treasures, which included a second edition Milton. Mrs Helen Beere, who worked closely with him to the last, says that 'his mind remained clear to the end, and indeed he was struggling to write to within a week of his death. I think it was all that kept him alive.'

During those last years, Visiak managed to write at least two short stories and 'The Queen of Beauty' is one of them. It has never appeared anywhere to date and this marks its first publication. In it, Visiak returns to his old love, the sea, and as in Medusa, *tells of a strange voyage to unknown waters.*

* * *

The woman whose beauty brought about the following extraordinary adventure had a horror of notoriety, regarding it as a form of vulgarity. She belonged to the *noblesse*, in the real as well as the actual sense. I was closely associated with and indebted to her; I therefore remained silent. It happened many years ago—in my younger days—and Stella is no longer living; even so, of course, I shall not divulge the surname.

I saw her first in a country road alongside an extensive estate. It was night, a moonlit night, and the moonlight seemed to merge with the lovely delicacy and exotic distinction of her face and form. She was dressed in some shade of greyish bright blue, softly shimmering in the moonlight. I only saw her contour as she was standing looking intently in between a rift in the small bricks of the old wall. I, by raising myself on my toes, was enabled to see over it and I saw a tall Indian who was engaged in releasing a rabbit caught in a gin-trap. The rabbit proved to be too much hurt to be mercifully left alive, and the Indian at once killed it with a skilful blow.

'Good man!' Stella exclaimed.

'Yes. Well done!' I cried.

The Indian came to the wall. As he looked down at Stella, he started and stared, ejaculating something in his own language, his great black eyes distending. Then obviously collecting himself, he said sententiously:

'Cruelty I regard as unpardonable.'

'The gin-trap is certainly very cruel,' I put in.

'I will not have them on my estate,' Stella said, her voice as charming as her person. 'If one is discovered, it is at once destroyed.'

The conversation led to both the Indian and myself being invited to visit her at a renovated cottage she had in the neighbourhood. The acquaintance increased; she had as many suitors, it appeared, as the wife of Ulysses. We were not suitors. The Indian, Krishna Rao, was a Brahmin of high caste and an ascetic, and I was a puritan of Victorian severity. I was, moreover, a philosopher, an idealist, and had been deeply impressed in my earlier youth by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius' advice to his son, that if he saw a beautiful woman in the street, he should regard her as he would a beautiful plant, or a beautiful

animal, a view that accorded, on reflection, with the myth in Genesis: of the tree that was for the eyes and not for the lower senses.

The situation was to Stella's mind; she was satiated with suitors—also, she had been shocked, I learnt, because one, rejected and abandoning hope, had hanged himself.

Stella was interested in philosophy as well as impressionable to poetry, so that we often read together, especially ideal philosophy, such as Schopenhauer's. It was as if we held ourselves in this literary way at a distance. Occasionally Krishna Rao joined us in philosophical discussion.

Stella was attracted to the Indian for a particular reason; a strange one: there was a legend in her family, embodied in an ancestral manuscript dating from the eighteenth century.

'A kind of South Sea Lourdes,' I commented when she had shown it to me; one of her forebears, it appeared, had visited a Pacific island which had a physically virtuous, blissful atmosphere, because it had been lived in by a great Indian yogi, who had emigrated there with his disciples.

Krishna Rao told her that there was, in fact, such a virtuous island, and that its position was a matter of Hindustani secret knowledge.

'Would you guide me there if I bought a steamer?' she asked him.

'You are kind, lady, you are worthy; the knowledge of the island that has come down to you makes it fitting. I would guide you.'

Her eyes brightened. 'Then I will go!'

'There was a steam-yacht for sale at Lowestoft last week,' she went on, 'a large one—just the sort! Perhaps it's still going!'

She looked at me with her scintillating blue eyes. My heart leapt, for I read the meaning in them. I was to go with her.

The terms on which Stella and I continued were ordinarily cordial, but once she asked me, surprisingly, whether I had ever been in love. I answered, with affected casualness, 'Oh, everybody is, or has been, I suppose.' She looked at me curiously, but did not pursue the subject. Whether she was in love with me, whether indeed she was susceptible of 'being in love', I do not

know, but there are a few women, such for instance, as Dorothy Wordsworth, who can be intimately friendly with a man, especially a young man, without being in love with him. At the same time, there are a few men, like Coleridge, who can be intimately attracted by a beautiful woman without being—or allowing himself to be—in love with her.

Stella was as excitedly impetuous as a child, and proved steadfastly in earnest about voyaging to the island with Krishna Rao as guide, or eventual pilot. She was free in circumstances to do so, being both an orphan and an only child, who, after coming of age, had disagreed with and parted from her guardian. But she wanted an English companion—not a suitor—and she chose me.

My bank training, for I was a bank clerk, was useful in stabilizing her finances during her absence from England. I was instrumental, also, in domestic matters; for, besides her family estate, which was in Suffolk, she had a town house in London.

As for the personal attractiveness of such an employer, I believed that I could resist its charm, the more so because I aspired to be a writer and had been deeply impressed in Milton's prose works by his assertion that the practice in youth of the Pythagorean-Platonic doctrine of chastity had enabled his poetic 'wings to grow'. I had formed the belief that 'repression' was a form of mental travail that conduced to imaginative and poetic facility.

Stella bought the steam-yacht—one of ninety tons—for it was still for sale, laid up in the inner harbour at Lowestoft; a sound, finely built, fast vessel—she had a speed of fourteen knots—with a high sloping funnel and two masts rigged for sail in the old fashion. I managed to contact and re-engage the previous captain, a short, thickset, tough looking man, whose hair and beard had begun to grow grizzled. His speech and manner were in character, brief and bluff; but he was readily obliging in obtaining a mate and crew. I had some difficulty in getting him to agree to be guided, at least in the latter part of the voyage, by the Indian. However, in little more than a month —Stella being very expeditious—we were ready to weigh.

In the meantime, I was visited by one of Stella's suitors, a

wealthy indigo merchant, Howland by name. He was a fine, upstanding man, with a personal quality and style, but his haggard face and the look in his eyes betrayed him as almost beside himself.

'I hear that you are going with Lady —— on a long voyage,' he began, tugging at his short, dark, beard. 'Will you allow me to ask you a straight question? Are you in love with her and is she in love with you?'

'No, it isn't on those grounds,' I replied, offering him a cigar, which he took but did not light. 'I'm acting for her in a business way, and going with her in—how shall I put it? Well, as a kind of nominal English attendant.'

'Thank you for telling me,' he said heavily, 'but it's difficult to see how any man can't be in love with her.'

'I can claim to be a philosopher,' was my answer. 'One can prove intellectually, mentally, that "love", in that attractive sense, is essentially illusion, and I've written a book—fiction—to prove emotionally that it is so.'

'But she may be in love with you.'

'She treats me just as she does Krishna Rao, who is going with us.'

'Do you yourself trust the Indian?' he asked.

'He seems quite sincere.'

' "Seems" is not enough. I have lived with them. They can be very crafty.'

'But his humane feelings—you know about his releasing a rabbit from a gin-trap?'

'Consideration, reverence for animals is an article of their religion. One virtue doesn't necessarily insure another.'

'When do you start?'

'Next month, the twenty-second.'

He also asked from what port.

I vividly recollect the occasion of Stella's and my arrival at Lowestoft, at the dusky, fish-box smelling station, to go on board the steam-yacht. The yacht had been tugged through the swing bridge into the outer harbour, and lay alongside the quay, coaling up, the consequential-looking little tug in position before her bows. We went on board, our luggage following after.

The month was August, with settled, fine weather and, although it was late afternoon, the decks gleamed spotlessly white. The captain stood to welcome us, if somewhat punctiliously, before ascending to the bridge. We went down the companion, and the state cabin, wall-papered in cream, and upholstered in scarlet, appeared to brighten under the hatch, or skylight, as we entered.

After being towed out of Lowestoft Harbour, we went on, the wind being steady and favourable, under sail alone. The weather continued mild until we came into the Bay of Biscay, when it became stormy, and the yacht rolled and pitched, hurled about among towering, toppling waves, which, breaking, came thrashing and flooding over our decks fore and aft. Our sails were brailed up, and the smoke fumed murkily downwards from our funnels. Stella and I, excellent sailors both, exulted in the turmoil, admiring the sturdy buoyancy of the yacht. Krishna Rao, however, was sequestered, far to seek.

At length the gale moderated, the wind sank, and the seas were violent only through their own residual inertia. Mild weather returned and we hoisted sail again, but the wind sank altogether. The weather grew warm and sultry; more and more so, as we proceeded in the Atlantic. The nights alone were cool; Stella and I and Krishna Rao discussed metaphysical mysteries under the brilliant stars, the Brahmin argued that beauty was sublimity in the feminine gender. It was the attribute, he assured us, of the divine Thais, 'the Great Mother', and had fallen into the abuse of sexual desire.

In the daytime, we lounged, read or talked desultorily, in deck-chairs under the shadow of the bridge. Both Stella and the humane Brahmin saw to it that flying fish that flapped on to the decks were returned to the sea.

The captain had increased steam, and this afforded a facsimile wind, refreshing if one stood in the bows. One morning, the mate, a lively, fair-haired young man, who hung about us a good deal, when he had the chance, told us that there was, apparently, another craft following in our wake. 'I've seen her

through my glass morning after morning,' he said, 'and always at about the same distance.'

'What sort of craft?' I asked.

'Take a sight, sir.' He handed me his powerful lens, and as I looked while he directed the glass, there came distinctly into my field of vision the hull and smokestack of a steamer.

The sultry weather brought on a mist, which thickened into a veritable fog. Visibility well nigh ceased; and, as we were in the track of ships, our speed was reduced to a speed of a few knots. The worry of the captain showed in his increased taciturnity. He told us nothing.

Stella's high spirit would not long tolerate the captain's reticence. 'Captain,' she said to him one dark morning as, relieved by the mate, he had descended from the bridge, 'I would naturally like to know about our position. I understand, of course, that you can't take any observation about our bearing, but I have a feeling that there's something else that worries you.'

'That's so, Madam.'

He spoke in a tone which was as much to imply 'that's my business'.

'What is it? Tell me!'

'We are in a strong drift, or current, in some out-of-the-way pocket of the ocean.'

'But can't you get out of it?'

'No, Madam, it's full of weed which affects the propeller.'

Later that day an astonishing thing happened. An arc of dazzling white light, like the searchlight of a warship, pierced the obscurity, jerking about until it fixed for some moments upon us, illuminating our decks.

'That's the ship that's following us,' the mate exclaimed.

Thereafter, the phenomenon occurred at intervals both day and night. The effect was naturally salutary in our depressing position of the unlifting fog dankly illumined by day, as it was, by a haze, and the frightening anxiety of the captain. The comforting searchlight flashed out, sought and found us also in the dense of the night. 'Can it be a Government boat?' I said to Stella. 'Can any influential person connected with your family have—' I broke off; it was too preposterous a notion.

There was coolness—at least, abatement of the sultry heat—on deck at night; but the density of the darkness, made visible, as it were, by the lights on the yacht, red and green at starboard and port and yellow-white on the mast, was also in its way overpowering, seeming unnatural, and we remained for the most part, in the lamplit saloon: the Indian retired early to his bunk.

One night, or early morning, I had a more than ordinarily vivid dream: I was in a room in which the furniture, overgrown grotesquely with dank, dark verdure, was exceedingly solid and weighty. When I awoke the terrifying atmospheric consciousness of it, as is common in nightmares, remained. But it did not pass away. I continued to feel that everything about me was unwontedly massive. And then I comprehended the reason: the yacht was stationary with only slightly undulatory motion; it had stopped, and apparently, stuck.

Had it run ashore on some unknown terrain? I drew on my dressing-gown and hastened on deck.

There was a flaring light in the stern, a kind of bulky torch set up in a circular contrivance near the taffrail, and beside it stood the captain and mate in consultation. 'What is the matter? What has happened?' I asked, approaching.

'Happened?' the captain answered, facing round irascibly, 'a damnable thing has happened. The propeller's clogged with weed.'

The full meaning of the words struck me dully. 'Can't it be cleared?' I said.

'Cleared? and for how long?'

'We're in a muck of weed,' the mate explained, 'worse, much worse than the Sargasso Sea— Blazes! Look at that!'

He pointed over the bulwarks to starboard. An enormous snake had shot its head above the sea, perhaps attracted by the starboard lantern.

'At least six feet long, the horror!' he added, 'I wish I had my revolver.'

I thought of the Ancient Mariner's benign reaction to his loathing of such sea-reptiles: 'Beyond the shadow of the ships I watched the water snakes ... oh, happy things! No tongue Their beauty might declare.'

And two nights later, while Stella and I were on deck, a most horrific thing happened. There was a faint glimmer of moonshine dismally reflecting the dark green weed as we looked on the bulwarks, and an enormous squid lay flat upon the weedy water. It had a glistening black centre surrounded by slimy white, like a grotesque poached egg upon the weedy conglomeration. Suddenly, it moved and a long, tube-like tentacle shot up from its side, sprawling over the bulwarks, a yard or two from where we stood. Then, for the first time, Stella showed fear, which took a surprising form. She started forward, throwing her arms round me. I drew her astern, and the tentacles slithering over the gunwale, fastened on one of the hands. The man shrieked out. The mate rushed into the deck-house and emerged with an axe, which after two violent blows, for it had the flabby constitution of rubber, he severed the tentacle. An inky black fluid darkened the water, emitting a strong dusky smell. The creature disappeared. The man, who had fainted, was attended to by Krishna Rao, who had medical knowledge.

Stella still clung to me, but I reassured her and drew her down the companion. 'Oh Henry, what a horror!' she cried, for the first time calling me by my Christian name. I induced her to drink some brandy, and saw her to her cabin.

I was just in time when I returned on deck to see the searchlight flashing in the distant darkness.

Next day the captain set up a signal of danger. 'If she comes too near, and gets caught in the current and the weed, she'll be no more help to herself than to us.'

'If only the fog would clear,' the mate said, 'she might be able to tow us out.'

'But how could she get a cable to us without coming too near?' said the captain, whose mood had changed. 'She isn't a whaler with a parachute; they don't carry searchlights.'

'There might be a way,' said the optimistic mate, 'if we had a wind and the fog cleared.'

The captain lighted up his pipe, and returned moodily to his cabin whence he had been summoned. I followed, to renew—the hour was then dawn—my interrupted sleep.

I slept deep and long, even until midday. I was amazed; it

was midday indeed! midday daylight! the cabin was full of it! The fog had been dispersed; a wind had sprung up!

I dressed with what I can only describe as excited rapidity, and sped up the companion. Stella welcomed me on the half-deck. She was alone, Krishna Rao being below, probably for his meditations. 'You've had a good sleep,' she said, 'and awakened to a good day!' The sky and calm sea were radiant bright blue. There was a steady but not strong wind, a singing in the shrouds, a pleasant sound of creaking blocks, with white flecks of cloud in the west. Some two miles away on our starboard quarters, there was a two-masted steamer, which seemed to be approaching us obliquely under sail alone; at any rate, no smoke appeared coming from her funnel. 'That's, of course,' I said to Stella, 'where the searchlights come from.'

'Yes. The mate says she's a steam-yacht like ours, but larger.'

'We are still stuck in the weed,' I said as the alarming fact recurred to me.

'Yes, and you see those two signal flags,' she said, pointing astern, 'they are to warn them over there not to get into the current.'

'But can they tell where it is?'

'I asked the captain that very question. He said it was determinable on this side of it by the different look and discolouration of the water.'

'Could he determine it himself—I mean, through his glass?'

'He didn't say.'

'But that's important because they may be able to tow us off, but if the current extended too far, they couldn't get near enough—I mean to get a cable on board for us to connect up. It's a pity, as the captain said, that they aren't a whaler, because then they could parachute a cable like a harpoon.'

'Let's hope they'll find a way.'

Stella possessed the high-bred courage of optimism.

At any rate, I felt, the sight itself of the approaching steamer, was enheartening.

She came about, a mile from us, lay-to, ran up a signal flag, and lowered her longboat. Stella, followed by me, had followed the captain, who was now on the bridge with the mate. She could make the captain communicative, and she had done so

now. 'They are going to map out the current,' he said.

'Find out how near they can bring their ship to us with safety.'

'Yes, Madam.'

When the longboat had come a good way, Stella and I, looking through our glasses, were startled almost simultaneously, Stella exclaiming. 'It's—it's John Howland,' she cried. She referred to the man seated in the stern sheets; he was indeed that persistent suitor, the indigo merchant!

'A Sherlock Holmes would have guessed, or rather deduced it,' I said.

Stella looked not only startled, but troubled, disconcerted; the reason was obvious, if the man saved us and she couldn't reciprocate his devotion in the way he wanted, the situation would be embarrassing.

The thought was interrupted by an oath from the captain. The rowers of the longboat had pulled in their oars, and were bending over the gunwale, apparently scrutinizing the sea beside them. They then brought the boat round, and began to return to their vessel.

'What is the matter?' Stella asked.

'It isn't nearly long enough.'

'You mean,' I said, 'to get a cable on board of us?'

'Of course,' he said gruffly.

'They may find a way.'

They did so eventually, and it was in a most ingenious way. They constructed a sort of raft, lowered it on to their jolly-boat, and then, on to it put a coiled-up cable. In the meantime they manned the jolly-boat. They then began to row towards the current. Upon reaching the side of it, they launched the raft and cable, impelling them with their oars on to the flow, so that the raft began to drift towards the weed-clotted water.

Slower and slower it drifted along until it came to the part where the current was stagnated, almost solidified. Then an extraordinary thing happened. The heavy raft was raised right up above the weed, which was broken up and thrown into commotion on all sides as if, and doubtless by, some kind of enormous sea-reptile in the depths. The violent upheaval and disturbance in the weed precipitated the raft, already near our

yacht, sufficiently near for us to grapple hold of and haul the cable on board. This was effected over our bows by two men who had clambered out on the bowsprit. Fortunately the yacht had moved—gradually—into a position directly on a bowline to the other steam-yacht, which had been coming along under steam until she was opposite, and as near as was safe, to us. The cable was affixed at the bows. The other end, which had been retained with sufficient slack to avoid checking the raft's progression, was attached to the other yacht's bows. It was hauled in, and the great yacht weathered round in line with us at right angles to the current.

On our own yacht, the mate had suggested to the captain that, if the propeller was cleared, it might take a few turns before becoming clogged again, and thus assist at the attempt to tow us clear; the captain, though sceptical, had called to the engine-room for full steam, and volumes of black smoke poured from our funnels—I could not but be diverted by the celerity with which Stella took cover from the flying smuts. The boatswain and his mate, in the dinghy under the stern, were attempting to clear the propeller, taking turns, in bending downward right under the weed. At length, the mate, who had been leaning over the taffrail recalled the men and dinghy on board.

The time for the great venture was now come. The flag-signal was given. Howland's yacht set going under full steam. The cable straightened and tautened. It was terribly doubtful whether it could bear, without parting, the tremendous strain. But the mysterious disturbance that had occurred amongst the coagulated weed, had loosened it about our yacht; also, under full sail, as we lay, we were in the wind which, assisted thus, the cable held; the yacht began to move and was soon being steadily drawn through the clotted water, gathering way as it cleared, until she fairly sped across the comparatively clear margin of the current into the normal ocean.

Both yachts were then laid-to, the cable unfastened from ours and hauled in by the other. Soon the longboat of the latter was launched and with Howland, as on the other occasion, in her stern.

Stella, when he arrived on board, concealed her embarrass-

ment with the most exuberant expressions of gratitude and admiration; but the poor man, if rich merchant, wanted more than gratitude and admiration. He could not even persuade her —as he fully expected she would have done after her horrific experience—to abandon her quest for her ancestral island, and return home.

This was obviously to the satisfaction of Krishna Rao, who remarked to me, aside, 'He worships beauty in the wrong way.'

'If you worship a quality,' I answered with some asperity, 'it should be goodness, not beauty.'

'Beauty includes goodness.'

'Not necessarily,' I said, and cited the case of the court beauty whose portrait was painted by an artist of genius. It was exactly faithful in form and feature, but it brought out the essentially evil nature of the woman, so that no one could bear to look at it.

Krishna begged the question. 'At the least,' he said, 'Mr Howland has made manifest the goodness of devotion.'

He had done so indeed; and when he saw that Stella was obdurate about continuing the voyage, he said, with a pretence of asking permission, that he would follow as before. 'I have a Nordenfeldt gun in my stern,' he added, 'and it may come in useful considering the barbarous parts we shall be in.'

'And I hope,' said Stella graciously, 'that you will be nearer.'

Howland gazed at her, meditatively fingering his short beard, and I thought he might be hoping there was an innuendo in her words.

He returned moodily to his yacht.

The present work is essentially a study of beauty and ugliness, for no one could be more beautiful than Stella, and nothing could be more ugly than the squid with the baleful eyes, a beak and terrible tentacles branching from its head. Other circumstances and sights of the sea—glimpses of dolphins and porpoises, bonitos, distant sights of blowing whales, and so forth, in the further part of our voyage, after we had returned to our course in the Atlantic, and then followed the coast of Africa

to the Indian Ocean, it is unnecessary to recount.

In sight of the island whither Krishna Rao had eventually directed our captain, we arrived on an evening, with the clamour and prospect of breakers; but there remained light enough to disclose a coral reef, with a considerable gap in it, through which we were able to pass into a large lagoon. Howland's yacht followed ours, and we lay stem to stern. We had a glimpse of wooden buildings, somewhat strangely and elegantly shaped amid groves of coconut trees; but almost immediately afterwards, dark fell.

Nothing notable happened during the night, but I was awakened early next morning by a strangely loud silvery chime. On going to the deck and crossing to the port bulwarks, I saw a startling sight. On the white sands in front of me, there stood a large image of a woman, coral red, draped in a snow-white robe. I had my powerful lens and saw, to my amazement, that the face of the image almost exactly resembled Stella's. Islanders, who seemed to be Indian like Krishna Rao, were assembling along the shore, probably in response to the silvery chime, whatever it was. It had been sounded by Krishna Rao, with some kind of instrument he had in his hand.

'You see,' he said, 'it is the image of our queen of beauty!' He glanced aside as he spoke, and, following his gaze, I saw Howland clambering over the bows of his yacht on to our poop. He joined us with excited celerity. 'You've seen it!' he cried. 'What can it mean? The likeness is exact! Ah, she's coming.'

Stella had emerged from the companion and was approaching. Krishna Rao turned, salaaming low, and uttered what was evidently a prepared speech. 'Most beautiful lady, Queen of Beauty,' he said, 'behold and accept your devout worshippers.' The beach, by this time, was crowded with Indians, and Krishna shouted to them in his own language. For a few moments, as Stella stood at the bulwarks, they all stood at gaze; then, as with one accord, threw themselves down, quite covering the light sands.

Stella turned to me, her face with a distracted look, very pale. 'I do not like this,' she said faintly, 'I won't go ashore.'

'Nor shall you,' I said warmly. A doubt had assailed me, and

I turned fiercely to Krishna Rao. 'I have a question to ask you,' I said. 'In the original ancestral manuscript, it is stated that the island has a great mountain, a dead volcano, and I can't see the slightest sign of it, how is this?'

He had obviously expected such a question; he had his answer ready. 'The volcano was not really dead. It broke out again like Vesuvius which destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum, and the eruption levelled the whole island.'

'And coconut trees grew out of the lava,' I said sarcastically. 'Have you ever heard of a volcano falling down in such a way?'

'Some Pacific islands are nothing else but dead volcanoes.'

'Yes, but they haven't got coral reefs.'

Here Howland, who stood beside us, broke in. 'It's time we moved out of this,' he said.

Krishna, with an evil look, turned to address his fellow-islanders—as they obviously were. They had now all risen to their feet. Howland listened intently, his brows knit. Suddenly he grasped me by the arm, saying in my ear, 'If she won't go, they'll try to carry her off. Tell your captain to manoeuvre round and get out, and we'll follow. I'm off to man my Nordenfeldt gun.'

He sped off astern, while I mounted to the bridge.

'I shall have to go right round the lagoon,' the captain said, 'and there may not be enough water. It was a damnable mistake to come in at all.'

'That's so,' I said, 'but you see they are already coming off to board us'—the great rowing boats had been launched, and many of the Indians had begun to swim towards us—'there's no time to lose.'

He swore, but spoke down to the engine-room, and gave his orders to the steersman. The yacht began slowly to move. I quickly rejoined Stella, who had remained beside the bulwarks, in control of herself but very pale, and with a look in her eyes like that of a frightened child.

'It will be all right,' I told her. 'We are leaving the lagoon.'

'I shall be so glad,' she said, 'he has been talking such nonsense, that they want to worship me as the "queen of beauty".'

'And I'll tell you what,' cried Howland, who returned at

this moment, addressing Krishna Rao, 'my men have their orders, and if any of your idiots attempt to come aboard, I'll smash their image with my gun. So, if you don't want that, you'd better deter them.'

'I would kill you.' The expression on Krishna's face was demoniac.

'For God's sake, increase speed,' I yelled to the captain as I saw that the two rowing boats were now close under our side, and the Indians in them beginning agilely to scale it. I was too late; everything happened within a few seconds, every deadly thing: Howland waved his white handkerchief in the air; the report of the Nordenfeldt gun rang out; the coral statue fell in fragments; Stella, whose image it had seemed to be, sank down in a faint. Krishna sprang at Howland, who had drawn his revolver and cocked it, and stabbed him with his tulwar; simultaneously the revolver exploded, and both men fell, both dead. Our decks became full of men, our men and Howland's, who had been armed with revolvers, repelling the boarding Indians, shooting them down. For myself, though full of fear, I was intent in getting Stella to her cabin, unharmed. The mate helped me to accomplish this.

The mate returned summarily to the deck, but I waited, until Stella, on the couch, revived; as she did with a sigh and a vague word which sounded like my Christian name.

'Be brave, as you naturally are,' I said, 'and lie here until I return, which will be soon, when I'll tell you all. We are now out of danger, or, of course, I couldn't leave you.'

The deck when I reached it was a shambles, as were all the decks, fore and aft. I helped to clear it of corpses, white as well as black; for the assailing Indians had used their tulwars with deadly effect. We were steaming, followed by the other yacht, out of the lagoon; while from the island came a tumultuous, lamentable sound, and I recalled a strange thing I had read that had happened in ancient times—as a ship was passing at night near a group of islands, a great voice arose, saying 'Pan is dead', and there was a weird, wild wailing.

The Uttermost Farthing

by

A. C. BENSON

In a previous anthology I introduced a ghost story by A. C. Benson (1862-1925) which had been discovered only after the author's death by his brother E. F. Benson, himself a famous writer of ghost stories. E. F. Benson published two of those stories he found; here is the second.

A. C. Benson followed a long academic career that took him from being a renowned school master at Eton, to President of Magdalene College, Cambridge, a post he held until his death. Like all the members of his famous family, he was a prolific writer, producing a constant stream of essays, novels, poetry and articles. In A. C. Benson's case, this was augmented by an average of twenty letters a day, and the keeping of a diary that eventually ran to four million words (approximately fifty times the length of this book). He was also fond of the occasional ghost story and wrote two complete volumes, The Hill of Trouble *(1903) and* The Isles of Sunset *(1905), as well as an eerie novel,* The Child of the Dawn *(1912).*

When E. F. Benson went through his brother's papers after his death, he came across two bulky volumes of unpublished ghost stories. Two of them greatly impressed him. 'They were carefully worked out, they brewed that atmosphere of uneasiness and apprehension that at the proper moment culminates in horror.' E. F. Benson himself held the view that to write a good ghost story 'the narrator must succeed in frightening himself before he can hope to frighten his readers'. You can rest assured that if 'The Uttermost Farthing' gained E. F. Benson's approval, it is something special indeed. It certainly builds to one of the most spine-chilling climaxes of any ghost story.

* * *

Yes, Hebden Hill was the next station, the porter told me, and as the dowdy little train puffed sturdily across the wide green flat, intersected by dykes, which had once been a great bay of the sea, I watched with pleasure the low shapely bluffs, like miniature seacliffs, but now covered with thickets and copses, which bounded the plain to the west half a mile away, and thought how like it was to the background of an old Italian picture. It was a warm summer evening, not oppressive, as there was a fresh breeze from the sea, along which white clouds sailed lazily landward. I could see far out in the plain hamlets and solitary farms nestling among trees; and it was pleasant to see the birds, crested plovers and pearly-grey gulls, that stood motionless, all facing up the wind in the pastures; and a lean grey heron by the old sluice-gate, poring upon the water.

And then I began to wonder how it was that I was going on so vaguely defined a visit to Hector Bendyshe, whom I knew so slightly. What exactly *did* I know about him? He was just an agreeable man, whom one was never surprised to meet at dinner, and whose talk, mildly interesting, seldom flagged. He had been at Winchester and at Oxford; he had been perhaps in the diplomatic service, and had certainly travelled a good deal. He was clearly wealthy, for he had a flat in town, and a house understood to be of an attractive kind in Sussex, at Hebden Hill. But he had done nothing particular for twenty years—he was a man of fifty—he read a good many books, he was fond of music, he was something of a connoisseur. But the more I reflected the less I seemed to know. He had no relations that I had ever heard of, and no intimate friends, though a host of acquaintances; he went everywhere and got on with everybody. He did not seem mysterious or secretive in any way; he talked easily and frankly about his own concerns and pursuits, and indeed on most topics of general interest.

How then had my visit come about? I was myself a so-called literary man, who lived, not very prosperously, in rooms in town, reviewing, writing literary articles, putting together an occasional book, and enabled by my small earnings and a little private income to exist in tolerable comfort. I was just over forty, and the artistic ambitions I had once had, had long

vanished; but I was more than content with my life, and my interest in other people was stronger than ever. The unexpected things that happened, the strange contrasts and contradictions of character, the amazing inconsistency of human beings and their intricate relations, so utterly different from and so much richer than the helpless conventional traditions of fiction—all this had kept alive in me a sense of romance in life which amply atoned for a career which had been disappointing and even humiliating.

I had met Bendyshe at a dinner-party some time in May. I had walked away with him, and he had asked me to his rooms. They were well furnished and comfortable, but with a certain austerity that took my fancy. Our talk had turned somehow on psychical things, in which I was a good deal interested; and before we had talked ten minutes I became aware that Bendyshe had dropped the mask of amiable levity which characterized his habitual conversation, and was speaking seriously and drily, but with a profound sense of conviction, which was quite unlike anything I had ever heard from him.

Suddenly he turned to me, a little sternly, I thought, and said, 'But perhaps you are not interested in these things?'

'Yes and no,' I said, 'but to tell the truth, I am a little surprised to find that *you* are.'

'Well,' he said, 'I don't wonder at that. You see, it has become of late rather a hobby of mine. I will tell you why some day, if you care to know. But tell me one thing: why do you say "Yes and no"?'

'Because,' I said, 'in the first place I think that ordinary talk about psychical things is such fearful twaddle. It seems to me a scientific affair; but when foolish people talk about it, it's all a mixture of feeble sentiment and weak imagination.'

'That's so,' he said; 'but if you feel about it like that, why don't you look into it?'

'Because the sort of experiments people try,' I said, 'such as séances and trances and automatic writing, seem to me more sickening still, like drug-taking; it's like deliberately playing with the ugliest part of one's mind, the part that deals in fear. I don't want to wake that up—I want to think it is not there; and, moreover, I am so much interested in people as I see and

know them that I don't want to explore the unknown.'

'You want to live in a fool's paradise, in fact,' said Bendyshe; and I could see from the pallor of his face and his distended nostrils that I had angered him; but he controlled himself. 'No,' he added, 'I ought not to say that—it was rude and stupid! I apologize.'

'No, please don't do that,' I said; 'it was my fault. What I said was very crude; it was like talking to a man of science about "stinks" or to an actor about his "patter"—the insolence of the amateur; that's unpardonable.'

'Well, but I *really* want to know,' he said rather gravely. 'I agreed with you up to a certain point; but what you said amounted to this, that you are so much interested in people when they are alive that you don't take any interest in what happens to them after they are dead?'

'Yes,' I said, 'that is quite fair. I am immensely interested in what I can see and observe and infer in people. It seems to me dramatic, exciting, sometimes very beautiful. But I'm a homeless man and a bachelor, and I don't get very near to them. I only see the polite side of life; and when people disappear, as they unhappily do, and I can't follow them further, why, I turn back to what I can see and know.'

'I understand perfectly,' he said; 'but it's just the other way with me. People seem to me so amazing, so incredibly fine at times and so unutterably low at others, that I can't believe it all begins and ends here, and I find myself consumed by the most intense curiosity, to use rather a feeble word, to know what the next act is. It seems to me all like a big rehearsal for something, full of trivial, grotesque, and annoying things—two people playing nap, a girl eating a sandwich as she waits for her cue—but the play is going on all the time, and everybody has his part. I feel that I *must* know what is behind it all, if it can be known. I'm not exaggerating when I say that I have thought many times of putting a pistol to my head in order to find out what does happen; but I doubt if it can be found out that way.'

He was silent for a little; musing inwardly. I watched him as he sat. He was a tall lean man, finely formed and modelled. He had close, crisply curling black hair, a little grizzled. His fore-

head was high, his eyebrows black, and he had large dark eyes which it seemed to me I had never seen fully opened before. He was clean-shaven, and his nose, straight and clean-cut, came down on a short upper lip; but the under-lip was full, and the chin perhaps a little large for symmetry. He had a slightly worn air, but his face, which was hardly marked by wrinkles, had a fresh colour like that of a man who lived much in the open air. If anything his expression was a little judicial; but when I had seen him on previous occasions, his prevailing expression was one of tolerant good-humour and friendliness. It had never occurred to me that he could be formidable, and indeed my impression had been that, if anything, he over-valued serenity and equanimity. There was nothing ascetic or scholarly about him. His hands were large and mobile, and had, I thought, more expression than his face; and his dress had a touch of negligence about it which became him well.

I had never thought him a particularly interesting man, because he never gave himself away or appeared to have any preferences. But now I had seen something very different, something alert, passionate, even terrifying.

But when he began to talk again, his mood had changed, and he was his old wary and kindly self.

'By the way,' he said, 'what do you generally do in the summer?'

'Oh, I stay about a little,' I said; 'but I have to stick pretty close to my work, you know. I'm a literary hack, and I have to be waiting on the stand in case of a call. If I happen to be in funds, I go to a quiet hotel somewhere—I rather like exploring the country; old houses and churches are the next most interesting things to people. But I generally end by being a little bored.'

'I wish you would come down and stay with me for a week or two,' he said. 'I have got rather a nice old house in Sussex, and it is a pleasant country. It is very quiet, and you could work if you wanted to, or wander about. I should like to talk this matter over with you.'

'Thank you very much,' I said; 'I should enjoy it immensely. Where did you say it was?'

'Hebden Hill,' he said. 'Not very far from Ashford—it's a biggish village. I'll drop you a line.'

II

That was at the end of May. I heard nothing more for a month and began to think he had forgotten all about it, or that he was perhaps sorry that he had shown me the inner side of himself. But at the end of June I had a note asking me to go down on July the 7th, and an hour or two later a wire. 'Am unexpectedly alone, and should be glad to see you tomorrow Thursday if you can manage it but don't alter arrangements. Would meet the train arriving 6.30. Hope you can stay a fortnight.'

It seemed to me a little peremptory perhaps? No, I had no engagements, and I was glad to get out of the heat of London, so I wired an acceptance, packed my books and papers, and went; and now that I was embarked I began to have a curious feeling that I was in for an adventure of some kind, not very pleasant.

However, I arrived in the summer twilight. Bendyshe was on the platform to meet me, and I could see from the civility of the officials that he was not only an important personage, but a highly popular one. He had a pleasant word for everybody, and he introduced me formally to the station-master, saying gravely, 'It's very important that my friend Mr Hartley should form a good impression of the place; you know, he writes in all the papers, and could make our fortunes by a paragraph.'

'Indeed, sir?' said the delighted station-master. 'I'm sure you're very welcome to Hebden Hill, sir. We're old-fashioned, but going ahead a bit nowadays.'

Bendyshe had a good car waiting. The station was at the bottom of the hill; and he motored me swiftly up a steep irregular street of red-brick and timbered houses with pleasant gardens—a most comfortable and homely place. At the top of the hill we turned into a small square or piazza, with five or six substantial eighteenth-century houses. Fronting the west end of the church was a long mellow brick wall with big gate-posts and a gate of fine ironwork. Behind this there appeared a handsome façade: a brick Georgian mansion with a pediment, a solid pillared doorway, seven windows above and

three on each side of the door, and a round window in the pediment. It was evidently the chief mansion of the village. The windows had old heavy casements painted white, and the house was flanked at each end by fine old sycamores.

'Here we are,' said Bendyshe. 'It's called the Manor-house, but it's not my idea of a manor-house at all!'

Inside appeared a white-painted, marble-flagged hall, heavily panelled and pillared, with two mahogany doors on each side and a broad balustraded staircase ascending under an arch at the end. It was all a little bare. There were a few portraits and some solid Chippendale chairs. A venerable and portly butler met us.

'Perhaps you would like to stroll round before you go and dress?' said Bendyshe. 'It's a good thing to get one's bearings clear at once.'

He showed me first a room to the left of the front door, a small dining-room panelled with dark oak. Here there were more portraits, and a fine Italian bust of a young man in red porphyry, evidently a masterpiece. The next room was a little library almost lined with books, with a big french window which opened on to the garden. 'This is *your* room,' said Bendyshe, 'and you can have it entirely to yourself to work in. My own study is upstairs.'

The door to the right of the front door led to a smoking-room, a comfortable place with a few red leather arm-chairs and some old dark landscape pictures in oil. 'This is everybody's room,' said Bendyshe. 'That other door leads to the back regions; but now we'll have a look at the garden.'

We went out through a door under the stairs. I could not restrain an exclamation of delight. We came out into a portico supported by pillars extending along the whole centre of the house, between two flanking shallow wings; it was paved with black-and-white marble, and furnished with some comfortable oak seats and tables.

The garden was not large, but beautifully designed. On each side it was walled, and shielded from intrusive eyes by a row on either hand of sycamores, fine old trees. The lawn was perfectly plain, but for a fine leaden statue of a youth with clasped hands looking upwards towards the house—a most

enchanting piece of work. At the far end, sheltered by a low wall, was a great flower-border, blazing with colour; and as we drew near, I could see that the ground fell rapidly—to a tiny park with clumps of trees on either hand, and beyond, a magnificent view of a great green plain with low wooded ridges and blue shadowy hills to the right, while a mile or two to the left we could see a wide expanse of sea.

I said something feeble about the wonderful beauty of the place, and its magnificence.

'Well, that's rather a tall word,' said Bendyshe. 'It isn't a big house really, and the domain extends to about fifty acres. But it is cleverly designed, and makes the best use of every inch of earth and sky.'

'Has it been long in your family?' I said.

'No, indeed,' said Bendyshe; 'I bought it just as it stands, furniture and all, from the last member of an old family—the Faulkners—that had come to hopeless grief. It was in an awful state—the house almost ruinous, the park full of weeds and thorn bushes. No one would look at it. But I heard of it by what we call accident, just when I wanted a house, about fifteen years ago, and saw its possibilities. I got it very cheap, and I really have not spent much money upon it. But I have got uncommonly fond of it, and feel as if I had lived here all my life, and a little more.'

The light was beginning to fade as we went back to the house, which I found was all lit by electric light, carefully subdued and shaded. We went upstairs. There was a corridor above the hall, only not so wide, with three doors on either side, and one to the right, close to the head of the stairs; and these I must describe with some particularity.

The first door on the left as we came up—the staircase had turned round to the right, so that we were facing in the direction of the front door—led to two staircases, one going up to the attics and one descending to the offices. The second door on the left led to Bendyshe's bedroom, a very bare place, with a press or two and a few books; then came a bathroom with a door from the bedroom, and opposite the door, another door led into Bendyshe's study, which communicated with the corridor by what was the third door on the left. The study was

entirely filled with books, had a big table covered with papers, and two very uncompromising oak writing-chairs. A room less luxurious I have seldom seen. It had no ornament but a single picture, a very beautiful portrait of a girl, fair-haired and blue-eyed, with an expression of the most perfect naturalness and simplicity, and full of animation and delight. The room had two windows, one looking out to the church, the other down towards the village.

We went out again into the corridor. The door opposite Bendyshe's study was my bedroom, one window of which looked towards the church, and the other on the great sycamore by the corner of the house. A little bathroom was attached. The room was furnished with great comfort, and had some fine water-colours. Returning down the corridor, the two other doors opened into the bedrooms similar to mine, each with a bathroom, and at the end, close to the head of the stairs, the remaining door led into another bedroom, which looked out on to the garden. But this room was wholly unfurnished, just a bare-boarded, white-panelled place, with that peculiar and unpleasant staleness that develops in an unventilated sun-baked room.

'I don't like this room,' said Bendyshe. 'It was the room, to tell you the truth, in which the scoundrel from whose heirs I bought the property came to his miserable end. It's a squalid story; and as for the room, well, I think there is something sinister about it. What do you feel? Yet it's a pity not to use it, because it has the finest view in the house!'

'I don't know,' said I; 'I think that the best way to exorcize disagreeable associations is not to fasten things up, but to let in a new current of pleasant usage.'

'Yes,' said Bendyshe; 'if I had children, I should make this their schoolroom—then it would be all right!'

An hour later we dined—a well-appointed meal, though a simple one, very promptly served.

'I don't know what you feel,' he said to me, 'but it always seems to me rather uncivilized to dawdle over food.' He himself ate rapidly, but with appetite, and drank a glass or two of wine. After dinner we withdrew to the smoking-room. Bendyshe was in his familiar mood, full of little anecdotes and reminis-

cences. When we had established ourselves with coffee and cigars, he said, 'Now let me first say how glad I am to see you here. I have a notion that we agree, more than perhaps appeared the other night, about that matter we spoke of; and I think you can help me very much, if you are disposed to do so. I think you are a fair-minded man and impartial. Would you mind telling me exactly where you stand? Or perhaps you are tired and would like to defer it? Tomorrow night, I ought to say, the parson, Fortescue by name, is coming to dine, a very interesting and remarkable man, so that if you would like to leave it alone, we must wait till the day after tomorrow—the evening is the only time to talk seriously about things.'

'I should like to start at once,' I said. 'But tell me, what did you mean by saying I could be of use to you?'

'Why,' said Bendyshe, 'living alone, as I do, and with but few people to talk things over with, one gets into a tangle. I generally have a visitor or two here, because solitude unadulterated is not a wholesome thing. But they are not the sort of people I can really talk to; and just now I have got hold of some new material—I am always collecting materials—and it doesn't seem to fit in with my ideas. But the point is this—how much and how little do you believe?'

'Oh,' I said, 'my position is a simple one. It's all just a question of evidence. Any materials ought to be rigidly scrutinized—one mustn't either accept or dismiss evidence summarily—and then one may begin to draw conclusions.'

'Yes,' said Bendyshe; 'that's very much what I believe. But it's uncommonly hard to trace these psychical stories to their source. I have tried to unravel a good many, and it gives one a deplorable opinion of the value of human evidence. But,' he went on, 'before we begin, I must tell you in as few words as I can how I came to set to work. I don't like to talk about it—it's like tearing open an old wound—but I must make this plain. Some twenty-five years ago I became engaged to a girl, the daughter of a parson; you saw her picture, perhaps, in my room. You must take it on trust from me that she was a wonderful creature, and gave me not only a new view of life, but something to live for.

'We arranged everything. We were to have lived in London,

and I was actually thinking of standing for Parliament, when just a month before our marriage she caught diphtheria and died within the week. I can't tell you what an appalling catastrophe it was for me. It had seemed to me that her love was the one thing I had been waiting for all my life, the one thing that had given me a reason for living. You see, I was an only son, entirely trusted and indulged by my parents, and with plenty of money about and no motive for exerting myself.

'The thing very nearly drove me mad. A week before she had been with me, answering every question I had asked of life, and giving me the very water of life to drink. And now she was gone without a word. The last time I saw her she didn't even know me. She was in torture and half-unconscious. And there was nothing left, not a glance or a sign or the faintest message to me whom she loved best, or to any other human being—and there were many that loved her. It was so utterly unlike her, and yet there it was. Her parents were what is called "wonderful". They had a strong religious faith, and it helped them through.'

Bendyshe stopped with a kind of gasp, gripped the arms of his chair, and abandoned himself for a minute to a paroxysm of misery. 'It all comes over me again,' he said. 'Don't look at me—I shall be all right in a minute.'

Presently he went on in a low voice: 'I hardly know what I did. I travelled, I did some exploration, I courted death, but it never came near me. But I never had the smallest sense of contact with her, or even of any thought coming from beyond.

'Then I came back and tried to occupy myself in many ways —what is called social service. But I'm a hopeless individualist, and I don't care about my fellow-men simply as such, and I was taken in many times.

'Then I started this work, and it began to seem to me the one thing worth doing—to find out, if I could, whether there was any possible contact with the spirits of the dead, whether they existed at all. I had all kinds of sickening experiences, but could find nothing definite.

'And I never could cross the threshold, though I came to believe that, under certain obscure conditions, living minds

could communicate direct with each other, apart from material agencies. And then the case seemed worse to me than ever, because it all seemed to depend upon material existence as a necessary condition.'

Then after a moment's pause, he went on slowly and rather wearily:

'And what makes things even worse is this. There are a good many stories of appearances which seem to have some element of truth about them. But most of these are connected with horrible and tragic occurrences—crimes, murders, solitary imprisonments, as if (supposing for a moment the things to be true) it were a punishment of some kind to have to return to the earth and to re-enact the scenes of desperation and wickedness. And even the unhappy victims of such outrages seem condemned to the same fate; as if the only motive force that could bring one back were fear and indelible horror, reconstructing incidents which one would give anything to forget, but cannot.

'If there were stories of spirits returning to earth to revive gratefully scenes of happiness and love, delightful experiences of youth and friendship and ingenuous aspiration, when the heart was full of hope and joy, it would be different; but no spirits ever seem to think of this. Are they ungrateful? Have they forgotten?'

'Religious people would perhaps say,' I said, 'that the happiness of the farther world was so great, that a blest spirit would never care to return to these half-lit skies, and to the memory of joys that were always shadowed by some fear of loss and separation.'

'But this is an utterly selfish and indifferent business,' said Bendyshe. 'We should despise it in a living human being. And even if it were so, have they no wish to comfort the hearts that ache with the memories of perished happiness? No; if the spirits of even the blest are so drugged and intoxicated with delight that they have no room for remembrance or tenderness, it is a more ghastly business still.'

We sat for a little while in silence. 'I expect it's about time to go to bed?' he said. 'I ought not to go on soliloquising like this.' He escorted me to my room, and said another friendly word

about my visit, adding, 'Breakfast at nine—please ask for anything you want. Hope you'll sleep well; and you will find some good bedside-books there if you want them.'

I was soon in bed, and I fell asleep in a mood of pleasurable anticipation. This was going to be a novel experience, I felt sure, and Bendyshe's theories interested me; and almost immediately, so it seemed, I woke from a dreamless sleep, with old Bartlett the butler in my room, coughing deferentially, and asking if I would have a cup of tea, and whether I would have a hot or cold bath, and if there was anything else I required.

III

That morning at breakfast I found Bendyshe in a cheerful and eminently commonplace mood. He told me stories about the village and the people and the country-side. I asked some questions about one of the portraits, an old, rugged-looking man with prominent eyes and upstanding hair.

'"*What the dickens!*" I call him,' said Bendyshe, smiling. 'But we'll leave all that to the Vicar, who is coming to dinner this evening—he knows far more about the house and the family than I do. He has been here thirty years—in fact his wife, now dead, was connected in some way with the Faulkners.'

After breakfast I went off to do some writing, but I did very little, and my mind ran with curious persistency on what Bendyshe had told me on the previous night. He did not look like a man who had ever had a great shock or passed through tragic experiences; indeed, his preoccupation with psychical matters seemed to me still a little unaccountable, and inconsistent with the fact that he evidently lived a busy and active life, and took a considerable share in local business.

He came and fetched me out about noon, and we strolled to the church and village. He had a word for all the people he met; he called the boys and girls by their Christian names; his hat went off to any woman. We met an old man hobbling along with two sticks.

'Why, Mr Barry,' said Bendyshe, 'I'm glad to see you about again. Feeling better? You look quite your old self again.'

'Thank you kindly, sir—yes, I'm better, Mr Bendyshe, but feeling powerful giddy at times!'

'Ah, that'll soon pass off in the open air,' said Bendyshe. 'Now, shall I step in this evening for a bit of a gossip, Mr Barry? I always get the news of the place from you. Hartley, this is Mr Barry; I call him the father of the place. He will be a hundred and one years old in January next—isn't that so?'

Mr Barry chuckled. 'Don't you believe Mr Bendyshe, sir,' he said to me with a smile. 'He will have his joke; 'tis only eighty-eight I am, last Febbery!'

So Bendyshe went on—but not for a moment did it seem an assumed heartiness, rather the natural overflowing of a neighbourly geniality; while a word of sympathy which he said to an old lady in rusty black was both tender and straightforward. With the children he was entirely delightful, with mysterious jests and allusions.

I said something about this. 'Oh, yes,' he said, 'a child likes to share a secret with a grown-up person, a secret which no one else knows. I'm not sure we don't all like it,' he added with a smile; 'a secret's rather an explosive thing.' We went to the church, a fine, ancient place which had evidently been carefully restored; one aisle was full of monuments to the Faulkner family, from a knight in armour in a canopied niche to a weeping nymph by Chantrey. 'Fancy throwing away an inheritance like that,' he said, as we looked at the old tombs; 'but the whole history of the family is a steady process of climbing down. I'll show you the remains of their old mansion, about half a mile away, one of these days. The Vicar thinks it is the doom of sacrilege, but that's rather too business-like a view for me!'

I grew more astonished as the day went on to find the polite and solitary diner-out transformed here into so bustling and genial a squire. I could not fit the puzzle together; and still less did he seem to me a man who carried about, hidden in his mind, so strange and haunting an aspiration.

In the afternoon it was very hot; we went round the house and looked at the portraits. They were not particularly good, but the family likeness was strong: and the picture of the last

of the Faulkner race, as a boy of sixteen, was a graceful and beautiful thing. It represented him in riding-dress standing beside a pony, slender, blue-eyed and light-haired, with a gentle, rather wistful expression. Next to the picture was one of his mother—a woman of rare beauty and charm—and a rather commonplace portrait on the other side of his father, a burly country squire.

'It's all rather an enigma,' said Bendyshe, looking thoughtfully at the portraits. 'Up till that time, you see, they had been very ordinary people, moderately prosperous, but not very successful, and quite unadventurous. There doesn't seem to have been a single instance of a man of any eminence among them, not even a soldier or a bishop. One of them was an M.P., but unseated for bribery. And then just when a strain of beauty comes into the family and a touch of romance, that minute the devil comes too. It looks as if there were something in the old idea of Nemesis, as if the way to be happy was not to attract the attention of the powers above. That pretty woman was an heiress, and the boy was born wealthy; and he was certainly charming, and I believe clever too—the Vicar shall tell us all about him this evening.'

I was somewhat struck by the interest which Bendyshe seemed to take in the old family. As a rule, the last thing that a new proprietor is interested in is the history of the family he has ousted. But Bendyshe seemed to wish to bring me into touch with the personalities of his predecessors, as though he desired me to draw some inference or to solve some problem. Indeed, when later in the afternoon he took me out and showed me the relics of the old Faulkner mansion, an octagonal turret and a crow-stepped gable, with a fine chimney-stack of moulded bricks, and a great dovecote, all forming part of a rather ramshackle farm, I became even more sure of this, and commented on it. Bendyshe laughed a short laugh, as though partly pleased and partly disconcerted, and said, 'Yes, don't you think it would all make rather a picturesque article?' adding with a smile, 'You see, if I take you away from your work, I ought to give you some copy in exchange. But don't let me bore you. I am afraid it is rather a tiresome fancy of mine, to speculate about my predecessors.'

'Oh, I'm not bored,' I said—'quite the reverse. What I feel is rather that you have some idea in your mind, which you want me to perceive for myself, and that you were, so to speak, inoculating me!' Bendyshe looked at me sharply, but I somehow saw that he was not displeased.

After tea I read and wrote a little in the library. I felt rather drowsy after a day in the open air, and fell asleep in my chair, but awakened suddenly with a start, and with a strong impression that someone had entered the room softly, and as softly withdrawn. I had, too, a sensation of something chilly in the air, and a faint earthy odour such as one connects with stone-built, underground, airless places. But it was all a momentary fancy; the flower-scented air was blowing in from the garden, and the bell of the church was ringing for Vespers. I got up and went out into the hall, and found Bendyshe with his hat on just going out of the front-door. 'Was it you who caught me napping just now?' I said.

Bendyshe gave me one of his quick glances, and said, 'Well, I thought you might be having forty winks'—and then added, a little shamefacedly, 'The fact is, I'm going to church—the Vicar is very good about services and doesn't get much of a congregation; besides, it makes me feel cosy, as Mrs Carlyle said of the glass of port. Do you care to come?'

'It isn't very much in my line,' I said lightly, 'but I'll come with pleasure—it's all part of the atmosphere; and besides, I shall get into the Vicar's good graces.'

We sat in the chancel. There were only two other people present, both women. The Vicar, a big, sanguine-faced man with a fine head of silky white hair, read evening prayer with great rapidity but with extreme reverence; and I was pleased to see never once looked in our direction. His reading of the lessons was strangely impressive; the second lesson was a chapter from the Gospel. 'When the evil spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and finding none ...' He had lowered his voice, and read as though it was a thing almost too terrible to be mentioned, except from a sense of duty. Just before the end of the passage he shut his book and made a slight pause; and then, as though it was his own comment, looking round at us, he added, 'So the last state of that

man is worse than the first.' And then he began the Nunc Dimittis in a tone of unmistakable relief.

When I got down before dinner, the Vicar and Bendyshe were sitting in the hall, talking in low tones. The Vicar got briskly up, and shook hands with me with great cordiality. His face was full of animation and benevolence. Bendyshe had said something to me about his being much of a mystic; but anything less mystical I had never seen. He was alive to the finger-tips. We had an amusing evening. The Vicar made a remarkably good meal, and told a few excellent stories of a local kind, crisply and shortly, in response to a direct request from Bendyshe. I indulged in some literary gossip, and the Vicar listened to stories about some of the well-known writers of the day with childish avidity and hearty laughter. 'Excellent, excellent!' I remember his saying. 'I have never been able to get on with his books—rather precious, I think?—but I'll give them another try; I didn't know the old man had so much blood in him!'

IV

We settled ourselves after dinner in the smoking-room, and as soon as we were alone, Bendyshe said to the Vicar, 'Now I want you to tell Hartley something about Hugh Faulkner'—adding to me, 'that is the man whose portrait as a boy I showed you—and what happened when you came here. I always think it is an extraordinary story. Hartley won't make capital out of it, you know—he is quite discreet!'

'Well, then,' said the Vicar, 'I'll tell you. It was over thirty years ago that Hugh Faulkner—he was a distant cousin of my dear wife—offered me the living through his lawyer. I came down and looked round, but Mr Faulkner was ill, and I could not see him. I was just thirty then, and working in a quiet country curacy; and this gave me exactly what I wanted: more work, and a chance of really getting a hold on a place—and a beautiful church too—and I won't pretend that a larger income wasn't some inducement.

'Well, we settled here; and then bit by bit became aware that things were very wrong indeed in this house. Hugh Faulkner

was about forty. His father and mother were both dead. He had been in the Guards, and he had done a good many wild things, and when at last he did something so outrageous that he was summarily told to send in his papers, he came down here. A less courageous man—he had plenty of courage—would have gone abroad for a bit, and waited for the thing to blow over. But he wasn't that sort. He came down here, and tried to brazen it out. But everyone knew about the scandal, and it was no use. People simply would not meet him, and were out when he called. He was cut and cold-shouldered everywhere. A few of the village people were civil to him; but he couldn't get servants, no one would accept his invitations. I've seen people in the street turn back rather than meet him. He stuck to it for weeks and months; and I tell you, Mr Hartley, my heart bled for that man, though one could neither like him nor trust him: but I couldn't help admiring him. He generally took no notice, but once or twice he lost his temper. I saw him with my own eyes stop and say something civil to a farmer—Pratt, by name—in the street, and the man pushed by: Faulkner went after him and screamed something into his ear—Pratt wasn't a very exemplary person, either—and the man went on white and shaking.

'One day he came to the Vicarage. I should say that I and my wife did see something of him; we went to dine there occasionally, but it was quite intolerable. He used to tell unpleasant stories, not anything to which you could take open exception, but one saw what he meant; and he had an old soldier-servant, a real ruffian, who used to giggle at the sideboard. One day he had come in to tea at the Vicarage, and he looked tired to death. While we were at tea, a neighbouring parson and his wife called. I mentioned Faulkner's name; they made hasty excuses—they couldn't stay for tea—they had only looked in. They didn't say a word to Faulkner, who stood there with his tea-cup looking as if he was on fire within. Then he went up to the parson as he was leaving the room, and said to him in a low voice, "So this is what you do for sinners, Mr Hale? What is your tone with the publicans?" What made it worse was that old Hale had the reputation of being rather too good a judge of wine.

'Then he said good-bye to us and marched out. I went back with him afterwards and did my best to talk to him. We parsons see some bad things, Mr Hartley, but I never had a worse hour. The man was possessed by devils, not by one only. He was not violent or obscene; he was simply desperate. And he told me, sitting in this very room, what some of his performances had been, and such a catalogue I never heard. However, that is all *sub sigillo*, you know. He said, I remember, that he had carefully considered whether he could have helped behaving so, and he had decided that he could not help it, and would do just the same again under the same conditions. "You see I didn't make myself," he said.

'Then he went on to say that once he had left the army he had kept clear of it all, except in one respect; but that the more he put the pillow on his desires, the more they peeped round the corner of it. He was quoting Martin Chuzzlewit, I believe? —he was a great reader, I should say—and then he asked me to tell him plainly if I thought he had a chance of putting things straight—"I'm really rather a good-natured man," he said, with a sort of pathos. "I hardly expect to be liked—but I want to live on decent terms with my neighbours." I said that it would take time, and it would depend on how he behaved—but that if he spoke to people as he had spoken to Hale at the Vicarage it was of no use expecting things to go better. "But the man was damnably insolent!" he said, "and I won't take that from anyone."

'Well, we argued on, and then I tried to go a step farther—that's my trade, you know—and I wanted to see if the man felt any kind of regret for any of the things he had done. He was quieter by that time, but he told me plainly to remember that I was not in my Sunday school. I nearly lost my temper at that, but I saw that it wouldn't do to back out. So I said that I was there to help him if I could, but that I could do nothing unless I knew more or less what his feeling was. "It's like calling in a doctor," I said, "and then keeping back some of your symptoms."

'And then, Mr Hartley, I had a look for the first and last time of my life into the soul of a very bad man. He told me that he regretted it, in a way, because he didn't like the consequences.

But that if there were no consequences, he would not even regret it. One phrase of his I remember, "Why, I think no more of doing this and that than you think about taking a cup of tea!" He went on to say that when certain temptations came to him, he had no choice—"I really don't think I am quite responsible," he said; "there is nothing in my mind that even wishes to resist." And as to feeling the need of forgiveness either from the people he had wronged or Almighty God, the idea seemed simply laughable to him; and I will only say this, that for the first and only time in my life I felt like doubting the power of God. And then at last I got away. I may add that for a month or two afterwards I was really ill. I could not sleep; I could not get the man's face out of my mind.

'And then there came a worse complication. Pratt, the farmer to whom Faulkner had spoken in the street, had an accident and was thrown out of his dog-cart; and Hale had a sort of stroke and was ill for some time. And this I think made matters hopeless. You know what sort of things people say, and underneath all our civilization there's a great deal of the ugliest old superstition left.

'After that Faulkner shut himself up altogether, except that he would ride or walk in the early summer mornings before people were about. In winter he hardly ever left the house; and what went on here I don't know—I don't like to think. He read a great deal, he did some gardening. I went to see him from time to time, but he would never talk freely again. He used to ask a few questions, and sometimes told me stories about his boyhood, things his mother had said to him—he had a curious kind of affection for her—the tricks he had played on his father; he seemed to me like a man in a dream. He also took to speculating on the Stock Exchange, and lost a lot of money. The only person who stuck to him was the old soldier-servant. They lived in three or four rooms, did their own cooking, smoked and drank together, and the house got into a filthy state. But nothing happened: he didn't die, he was never ill, he simply lived on. Once or twice old friends came too see him; and I remember one man—a retired Colonel, I believe—whom I met, leaving the house in haste, looking very much perturbed. He came up and spoke to me, said he had been to see his old

friend Faulkner—they had been subalterns together—and he had been very much shocked, "though I'm not very particular," he added. Then he suddenly said, "Tell me, is he mad?" "Not in the least," I said. "Then, good God," said the Colonel, "why doesn't the man shoot himself?"—and he went off straight to the station.

'Now, for more than ten years things went on—think what that means—the garden was all overgrown with bushes and brambles, with a path through to a plot where they grew vegetables; and in front the shrubs grew over the lower windows, and most of the upper windows were broken. But it shows what a strange thing human nature is, Mr Hartley, for I believe the people here were rather proud of it than otherwise, though there was once an ugly demonstration. The old soldier-servant used to be seen about—he did the shopping, and he was rather a feature of the place. And strange to say, I got rather to like the man. He had been a real ruffian, I expect, but the way that man stuck to poor Hugh—it was heroic. There was nothing he wouldn't have done for him, and he simply worshipped him. I used to wonder what would happen to Hugh if he died.

'I still went in at times to see Hugh, and I believe he was glad to see me, though when he was in a bad mood he used to ask me all kinds of ingenious and bewildering questions about religious matters which I could not answer; but as a rule I don't think he was even very consciously unhappy. They lived by a routine, and Hugh used to talk mysteriously of his experiments —I never quite knew what he meant, but nothing very good, I fear. And then there were stories—at one time the garden was thought to be full of great black birds; and at another there were supposed to be creatures which grunted and snorted about among the bushes, and screamed out sharply at night. There were said to be curious mounds in the garden, like earth thrown out from burrows. Sometimes the windows were lighted up, and music was heard; and a man was said to have been seen going up the wall at the back like a fly. But I never saw anything myself, except for the fact that the house seemed to me sometimes to be full of smells—bitter, suffocating smells, like nothing on earth; and at times appeared full of shadows, glid-

ing blacknesses, like mist or smoke. But I daresay all these things had some explanation.

'But I must bring my story to an end—and I must add that though I never quite gave up trying to get hold of something in Hugh's mind and heart that I could pull on, and though I said many prayers for him, it all was a total failure; but I somehow became aware of a change of atmosphere about the house, about Hugh himself. I had generally had the feeling as if some struggle was going on somewhere out of sight, or even as though one were watched by something that would like to make a spring if it dared. Hugh himself was less violent and quieter; it seemed like exhaustion.

'One night, about the end of April (I was alone then, for my dear wife had died the year before; and I must tell you that in one of the last talks we had, she said to me, "Don't give Hugh up—I think there is something coming to him," but she could not explain), I was working late when I heard someone tapping at the door, quietly and insistently; and I found it was Hugh's servant. He wanted me to come and see Hugh at once. "Did he send for me?" I said. "No, sir—but I'm frightened about him. He doesn't eat, he doesn't sleep—he sits watching something." The man kept moistening his lips as he spoke and then broke out, "Come and see if you can help him."

'I went off at once; and when we got into the house I knew that there was something very wrong indeed. There was a silence that appalled me—I have never experienced such a silence; and though it was a warm night, the house was deadly cold. But worse still, there seemed something holding us back which required pushing into. I fought my way upstairs; but the old servant gave up, sat down on the bottom step and watched me. There was one solitary candle in the hall, which flickered and cast hideous shadows.

'I went straight into Hugh's room—the room at the top of the stairs. I found him stretched fully dressed upon his bed, his eyes closed, and making motions with his hands as if he were trying to thrust something away. His brow was horribly puckered and his face seemed swollen and congested. I went up and took his hand, and he gave a kind of moan or wail—the sort of cry a hare gives when a keeper takes hold of it. "Don't

be afraid," I said; "it's only me. John, you know!" At this he sat up and opened his eyes. "The dream," he said, "the dream —it's closing in on me!" Then he said to me in a faint voice, "Surely it's enough?—it's all empty and dark—it's draining my life away!" Then he turned to me and said, "Where have I been?" I knew well enough. It isn't only a name, Mr Hartley, it's a very real thing—the most real thing but one in the world. Then he said to me, "Fifteen years of hell, John—does anything deserve that?" I hardly knew what I was saying then, for the cold that I had felt on the stairs was gathering in, thicker than ever. But I said—the words were given me somehow, "Perhaps you have done your punishment, Hugh; it's over and done." He shook his head and lay down again; and I just knelt down and said the last prayers, and in the middle he gave one shudder, which went through him from head to foot, and I knew he was gone.

'Yes, I know what you would like to ask me, Mr Hartley, and my answer is that I don't know. He was gone, but something else was gone too. The servant came running up the stairs, and looked in. I beckoned to him. He came and knelt down by me, and I finished the prayers; and when I had finished, he took my hand and pressed it; and then he took Hugh in his arms and stroked his face. I left them there, and went away a wiser man, I hope.

'The family lawyer came down, and he and I made a search for documents to no purpose. He had kept some papers in a despatch-box that was always near him; but this was missing, and could not be found. There was nothing to throw light on the matter, except that the servant said that he had lately been strange in manner and apathetic, and that he had lost his appetite; and I will only add that there was an inquest. I told my tale with reservations, and they called it natural death. I didn't hesitate to bury him in the churchyard, and there he lies; but no one came to the funeral. And the Bishop sent for me to enquire into the circumstances; but when I had finished the story, as much as it was fit for a Bishop to hear, he told me frankly that he had meant to suggest to me to resign my living, but that now he had altered his mind, and that I must on no account leave the place. I never saw a man in such a state of

what we will call godly embarrassment. And the next Sunday I made my flock a little sermon on "Judge not, that ye be not judged," and gave them a bit of my mind. And, strange to say, I have never had any trouble to speak of since.'

The Vicar made a long pause, and shook his head. I could see that there was something further in his mind which he had decided not to mention. I confess that this strange and tragic story produced an extraordinary effect upon me. For one thing, it was all so darkly mysterious, so full of unexplained hints and suggestions of evil, that it aroused in me a vague terror which made me wish that I had never listened to it. Not so Bendyshe; he was sitting back in his chair, his hands clasped together, looking at the Vicar with gleaming eyes, like a man on the brink of a great discovery.

Then the Vicar turned to me, and said, 'There, Mr Hartley, I have told you the story at Mr Bendyshe's request. You may be thinking that it is the sort of tale that had better not be told, and that such a collection of shocking incidents is better forgotten and buried in oblivion. But I have two reasons for telling you. In the first place, the outline of the story, only greatly exaggerated, is known to and repeated by a good many people in this place, and I should wish you to have a more accurate version of what happened—anything is better than secrecy about such things; and Mr Bendyshe tells me he has a special reason for asking me to relate it to you, which you no doubt know, and of which I approve. I think it ought to be seriously investigated.

'And then, too, I have a further reason. There are very dark corners in this world of ours, and facts of our existence, which seem inconsistent with any faith in a beneficent and Almighty Creator; and I don't think it right to ignore them. My own belief—I will speak frankly—is that God is slowly and patiently making a conquest of a world in which there exists—how originated I cannot even guess—a strong element of something atrocious and horrible, which defies Him, and seizes every opportunity of undoing His work. And to my mind, the horror of this story is that it seems like a deliberate attempt to focus this evil power, an attempt which failed, because this malignant influence, as I interpret it, is essentially what is called stupid.

It has no principle; it works at details with a laborious persistency—that is where its essential weakness lies; but it ought not to be ignored; it must be met by anyone who comes across it with courage and intelligence. I don't think that Hugh Faulkner did any very serious or deep-seated harm here, and he certainly did not succeed in making evil attractive. He may have struck a blow at individuals, and I believe that he certainly did—but that is all.

'And now I must ask you to excuse me, if I say good night. May I have the pleasure of seeing you at the Vicarage, Mr Hartley? You may have some questions to ask about what I have told you. But I have nothing to add, and I may not be in a position to give you an answer.'

The Vicar took his leave, and left on my mind the impression of great simplicity and goodness. He and Bendyshe went to the door together, and stood talking for some little time in low tones.

When Bendyshe came back, he said to me with a curious look, 'Now what do you think of all that?'

'I don't know what to make of it,' I said—'at present I'm simply rather stupefied. One goes along making the best of life and thinking the world on the whole a satisfactory and wholesome place; and then comes a tale like this, and one wonders if one has any real idea of what is going on, or of what may be hidden away in the minds of men and women. I wish I had never heard the story.'

'Oh, come,' said Bendyshe, 'don't say that—it seems to me to have all the elements of a big adventure. I would give anything to get a little more information; but here one only gets the wildest and silliest gossip. I may tell you that I have tried to get on the track of Faulkner's servant, but I can't find a trace of him.'

'I expect he is dead by this time,' I said.

'No,' said Bendyshe; 'he is not dead. I can say that quite confidently—I have my reasons.'

We sat for some little time together, and I asked Bendyshe one or two disjointed questions. I said, 'There was one point in what the Vicar said which I did not quite understand. He spoke

of Faulkner doing harm to individuals. What did he mean by that?'

'Well,' said Bendyshe, 'he meant Hale and Farmer Pratt in the first place; and there are some other cases too, if you care to hear them.'

'No, I don't want to hear them,' I said; 'but tell me this. Do you, and does the Vicar, really believe that Faulkner had the power of inflicting bodily damage upon these unfortunate men, without using some known human agency? Of course it might be that some mental shock and physical deterioration followed from a fright which—'

But Bendyshe interrupted me. 'Do I believe it?' he said. 'Why, I *know* it. Faulkner was just as much responsible for their illness as if he had fired a gun at them.'

'But how is it possible?' I said.

'Ah, I don't know that,' said Bendyshe; 'but that he had the power of doing that sort of thing—at all events in the case, let us say, of people whose moral force was weakened by some indulgence—is incontestable. He didn't use it often, I admit; he was afraid to do so; but in both of these cases, and in others which I could tell you, he lost all control of himself, and I believe that he let loose against them an undiluted current of evil; and the Vicar believes it too.'

'But it isn't rational,' I said; 'we don't believe in witchcraft in the twentieth century.'

'Perhaps it would be better if we did,' said Bendyshe grimly. 'We can't get rid of facts by calling them irrational.'

I saw that he was getting nettled by the discussion, so I said, 'Well, I must have time to let all this settle down.'

In a moment the other Bendyshe appeared. 'Yes,' he said; 'we mustn't let this visit of yours degenerate into a series of shocks and explosions. I've no right to do that, and if you give me a hint, I will drop my theory for a bit. But I very much hope you will help me to look into the matter. We'll have an easy day tomorrow.'

He accompanied me to my room and said, 'I hope the story tonight hasn't made you nervous? Perhaps this will reassure you.' He showed me, let in beneath the dado-cornice, in the corner by my bed, a little circle looking like the top of a wooden

peg, and painted white like the rest of the room. 'That's a fancy of mine. My butler, Bartlett, doesn't sleep in the house—he has a house in the village. And this bell rings in my room—both the other spare bedrooms have it. I put it up when old Ford was staying here, and was taken ill in the night and couldn't make anyone hear. If you press on that, I'll be with you in a minute. I'm a very light sleeper!'

'Oh, I'm not nervous,' I said. 'I'm a sound sleeper, and then I'm a rational man.'

Bendyshe smiled at this and said, 'Yes; that's just why I want your help. Good night, old man.'

V

Left to myself that night, I went slowly and deliberately to bed. I felt curiously tired and drowsy after the cataract of varied impressions which I had received during the day; and I was conscious, too, of a growing excitement. The Vicar's story had done more to arouse this than any of Bendyshe's semi-scientific theories. The Vicar, I felt, was a man without an axe to grind, and with a certain duty to perform in the world, a desire to illumine the darkness, to extinguish evil. He did not turn his back upon it or ignore it, and his aim was a practical one. Bendyshe, on the other hand, was like a man engaged in research; he simply wanted to arrive at facts. Indeed, there had been moments in the day when I had suspected him of being something very monomaniac; but his friendliness was engaging, and the appeal he had made to me for help had touched me. But help in what? That I could not say.

Just, I imagine, before I slept, I had a curious sensation of something vague and restless in the house, something that faintly jarred my drowsy nerves; it was all a fancy, but I thought dimly that someone, sleeplessly and wearily, was engaged in pacing about, and searching for a thing both secret and momentous, which had been mislaid or hidden. I wondered vaguely if the inquisitive brain of Bendyshe, weighing, considering, discriminating, was having a sort of telepathic effect on my own. The house was absolutely still; the church clock struck two with a murmur sweet as honey; and then, curiously

enough, I had a sensation of great mental ease. If anything was going forward, I was at least in no way concerned in it; the searcher did not wish me ill—my presence there was nothing to him. And then, I suppose, I passed into sleep.

While I dressed in the morning, I could see Bendyshe pacing in the narrow strip of garden that lay beneath my windows, lost in thought. He greeted me when I came downstairs with much effusion. 'Slept well?' he said. 'That's right. You look very fit and spry. We'll have a good spin today—we might go to Canterbury perhaps?' And yet, strange to say, I had an indefinable sense that Bendyshe was in some way disappointed.

Our run was uneventful enough. Bendyshe made no allusion to the narrative of the previous evening. I thought, indeed, that he was a little conscience-stricken for having plunged me, so to speak, up to the neck in these dark matters. In fact I do not think he had intended to do so, but his own overpowering interest, in the company of someone whom he thought sympathetic, had run away with him. I felt in a singularly placid mood, and the summer fields, the woodland corners, the hop-gardens, the hamlets through which we went, worked upon me like some gentle anodyne. We ate our luncheon on the shoulder of a high, upstanding ridge along which the road passed; and I was amazed at Bendyshe's knowledge of the country. There was hardly a church-tower visible that he could not name, and he was full of local and personal anecdotes which beguiled the time very pleasantly.

We got back for tea, and I then experienced something of a reaction. In spite of the beauty and comfort of the house, there came on me a sense of lurking dreariness which I could not analyse; something was going on there, in the cool rooms, the panelled corridors, which I could not penetrate. I tried to work, I tried to read—Bendyshe had gone off to the village on some friendly errand—and I became aware that I did not wish to be alone. When the dressing-gong sounded, I felt a strong disinclination to leave the room.

Ten minutes later I heard the front door open. Bendyshe's brisk stride was audible in the hall. This was a relief to me; but instead of coming, as I had expected, to the library, he went quickly upstairs. I decided that I must go too; but just as I got

to the head of the stairs, I became aware that someone was coming down the corridor as if from Bendyshe's room. It was beginning to be dusk, and I could not see the figure very plainly. It was a man, carelessly dressed in an old grey suit of clothes, shuffling along very noiselessly, his head hanging down, with a markedly sullen and dejected air. The face looked healthy but careworn, and it came into my mind that it was some petitioner who had come to make a request of Bendyshe, but who had been decisively and perhaps unceremoniously refused. I said 'Good evening' to the man as he passed me, and then I had a real surprise of rather an unpleasant kind, for he took not the slightest notice of me or my salutation, as if he neither heard nor saw me; he shuffled on down the corridor and was swallowed up in the shadow at the head of the stairs. Yet it did not seem to me an intentional rudeness, but rather as if the stranger's preoccupation was so intense that there was no room in his mind for any other impression.

I went and dressed and was downstairs in the smoking-room when Bendyshe appeared. 'You've had a busy evening,' I said. 'And I saw you got caught by a caller on coming in.'

Bendyshe looked at me quickly and interrogatively. 'Oh, yes,' he said, 'I have endless visitors—there's nothing I'm not asked to do.'

'But I expect you can't always do it,' I said. 'I passed your friend in the corridor, and I never saw disappointment so legibly written on anyone's face as on his—he hadn't even time to exchange civilities!'

'You spoke to him?' said Bendyshe, adding, 'Poor chap, yes, he has no end of troubles. But what the real trouble is I don't quite know. So he struck you as disappointed, did he?'

'Yes, indeed,' I said. 'I almost wonder that you had the heart to refuse him. He looked quite worn out, and took no notice whatever of me. I should like to know his history.'

Bendyshe stared at me in silence, and it struck me that I had been impertinent. 'I'm sorry,' I said, 'if I have been too inquisitive.'

'Good Lord, it isn't that,' said Bendyshe; 'but the man doesn't know what he wants, or at least I don't know what he wants—I can't make out, and that's just the difficulty. And when I

find out, then—well, then I shall know what to do.'

Bendyshe was in a very strange mood that evening—so strange that I more than once thought that my half-formed conjecture of the previous night was true. He seemed to be wrestling against the approach of a secret and triumphant mirth. Our talk turned on the ailments of middle-age, and I confessed to being conscious of the necessity of a régime. 'I don't believe in taking care of oneself,' he said—'plenty of air, enough exercise, variety, work, plenty of other people's business, not too much eating and drinking and smoking; and most of all, if you think you can't do a particular thing or don't want to, go and do it!'

'That's rather Spartan,' I said.

'No,' said Bendyshe; 'it's simply this—we have all of us got three at least, or even more, people inside us. There's the one that admires and enjoys—he's all right. Then there's the one that criticizes and reflects. Then there's the animal, which needs to be sensibly and good-humouredly drilled, like a dog or horse, and he's a patient and serviceable fellow enough. But behind them all, in the little innermost room, there's the one that fears, and he mustn't be listened to for a single instant, or he will run the whole show.'

'I never thought of it like that,' said I; 'yet I'm sure you are right. But which is the one that *wills*?'

'Oh, they all do that,' said Bendyshe, laughing; 'it's a kind of board. The point is that the right man should have the casting vote.' And then he was again overtaken by his tendency to laughter, and laughed unreservedly. I suppose that he detected some annoyance in my face, for he suddenly stopped. 'Forgive me,' he said; 'I have a fit of the giggles sometimes, and it is bad manners. But I have been lucky today. I have made some progress—more than I expected.'

After dinner we had a game of piquet, and went up to bed about midnight. As we came out at the head of the stairs, Bendyshe said, 'Was it here you met my poor friend? Which way did he go?'

'Down the stairs,' said I; 'but I lost sight of him.'

'Ah, he ought to have gone down the backstairs,' said Bendyshe, 'but I suppose he forgot. Hullo, what's this?' He turned

sharply round. The door leading into the unfurnished bedroom was open, and the moon shone in, showing the boarded floor and the clean-cut panelling. 'Who the devil did that?' said Bendyshe very irritably. 'Here, come in—let's have a look. Has there been someone prowling about, I wonder?' He led the way into the room, but I felt an insupportable reluctance to enter it. 'I must have this place locked up,' said Bendyshe, half to himself. 'Hullo, this is all quite new.'

I followed him into the room, suddenly feeling the need of company. He was bending down, looking at something on the floor. 'The wet must have got through,' said Bendyshe to himself. I drew nearer, and saw that a quantity of plaster had fallen from the ceiling; up above an irregular square opening appeared; but what, I confess, gave me a shudder of dismay was that the plaster on the floor had a strange resemblance to the shape of a prostrate figure. I saw at once that it was a merely accidental likeness, and even as I looked Bendyshe with his foot swept the débris together.

He took me to my room and said a few friendly words. I saw that he wished to obliterate the impression caused by his merriment. I went to bed, and, contrary to all my expectations, for the evening had been an agitating one, I slept profoundly. But before I slept, I half determined that I would not prolong my stay. Bendyshe was behaving very oddly; but then I thought of the Vicar, and I decided that as he had asked me to his house, I would go and consult him; and this brought me a sense of relief.

VI

The morning turned out insufferably hot. Bendyshe was very cheerful and pleasant at breakfast. He said he had directed that some chairs should be taken out into the shade of the sycamores. 'The verandah is a bit stuffy,' he said, 'when the wind is in the north.' He had got down a parcel of books from town, new books which he thought might interest me. And when we went out there was a table, and two chairs, and an irresistible heap of neat volumes of all shapes and sizes. We sat mostly in silence; occasionally Bendyshe went off to the house, and

twice at least he was summoned by the butler to see a caller. 'I lead a dog's life,' he said, laughing—'plenty of fleas!'

I had again become immersed in my book, when a sudden exclamation from Bendyshe, betraying a poignant and acute emotion, made me look up. He was leaning forwards, his gaze bent on the front of the house. At the closed window of the unfurnished bedroom, plainly visible, and indeed made curiously luminous by the sunlight, a man was standing looking out into the garden. He was, so far as I could judge, an elderly man, with a shock of grey hair, and a curiously blurred and puffy face, red and bloated. He was dressed in a sort of apron, dirty white, showing arms bare to the elbow. 'Who's that? What's that?' said Bendyshe in indescribable agitation. It seemed to me so unnecessary and unaccountable an excitement, that I said, 'Well, if you ask me, I should say it was the plasterer come to repair the ceiling.'

'You're right—you're right,' said Bendyshe, with a gesture of intense relief. 'Of course, I forgot—I mentioned it to Bartlett—but I didn't expect him today. I imagined—well, I don't know what I did imagine.' He got up from his chair and went hurriedly to the house.

I was by this time very seriously perturbed indeed about Bendyshe, and began to believe that he was on the brink of insanity. It rushed into my mind that I would go to the Vicarage at once. I went back to the house, where all was silent. Old Bartlett was laying the table in the dining-room. I said to him, 'If Mr Bendyshe asks for me, will you tell him I have just gone into the village, but shall be back in a few minutes?'

He was a comfortable and amiable old fellow. 'Certainly, sir,' he said; 'but it's a terrible hot day for the street—you'll wear your straw, no doubt, sir,' and he bustled out to open the door for me.

I arrived at the Vicarage—an old substantial house, behind the church—and was shown straight into the study. The Vicar greeted me very warmly. 'Yes, I had hoped I might see you, Mr Hartley,' he said. 'I'm afraid you think you have got into a very strange place here, and I'm not surprised at your coming.'

I sat down and told him the incidents of the morning and

the previous day. He listened to me very gravely. Then he said: 'I can't cast any light, I fear, on what has been happening—indeed, I am under a promise to Mr Bendyshe not to do so. But the important point is this. You may be absolutely and entirely reassured about his sanity. He is as sane as you are, and a great deal more sane than I am. He is the hardest-headed man I know. Mr Hartley, I can tell you that that man has gone through experiences which would have sent nine out of ten men crazy. And he is a man of great emotional sensibility too, but he has got infinite courage and inflexible purpose. I cannot tell you how I admire and reverence him. But I must add this: Bendyshe wants your help very much. It is worth your while to give it to him, and I think that, so far as I can judge from our short acquaintance, he has made a remarkably shrewd choice. But if, on the other hand, you feel in any way alarmed or repelled by the claim, I will go over to the Manor-house with you, and insist on your being released from any obligation—and he will take my advice.'

'No,' I said; 'once really assured of Bendyshe's sanity, I have no wish to be released. He shall have whatever help I can give him, for as long as I can give it—but I confess I do not quite trust myself.'

'Mr Hartley,' said the Vicar, 'you have chosen the right course, and I am infinitely relieved; and I may add this, that the results may turn out to be of the utmost importance. Please consult me at any time.'

Just as I was going, the Vicar said, 'Would it be troublesome if I asked you to take a note for me to Bendyshe? I will come round at 2.30 to speak to him about it; but I think he ought to have this news at once.'

The Vicar scribbled a few words on a sheet of writing-paper, enclosed in it an open telegram which was lying on the table, sealed and addressed an envelope, and handed it to me.

I returned to find luncheon ready and Bendyshe pacing in the hall, evidently in a state of great suppressed excitement. I handed him the note and gave him the Vicar's message. He tore the envelope open, read the enclosure, and a cry of surprise not unmixed with a deep satisfaction escaped from his lips. I thought for a moment that he was going to hand it to

me; but he did not, and presently replaced it carefully in the envelope. Then he looked at me, rather a grim and searching look. 'So you went round to see the Vicar?' he said. 'May I ask what you went to talk about?'

'Yes, certainly,' I replied. 'I was beginning to feel this morning that I was getting too deep into a rather mysterious business; and I don't feel very sure of myself. You must remember how new and unfamiliar this all is to me—how little, in fact, I know of you beyond a mere acquaintanceship, to speak plainly; and I felt the other night that the Vicar was a man I could trust, so I went round to ask him a few questions.'

Bendyshe put down his knife and fork and drummed with his fingers on the table. 'Well,' he said in rather a grim tone, 'what's the result?'

'He seemed to think,' I said, 'that you needed my assistance, and he was very insistent that I should give it, if I felt able to do so. And the long and short of it is that I decided to do so.'

Bendyshe's face lit up with a smile; he held out his hand to me, and I grasped it, feeling that some compact of a momentous kind was being made. 'Well, old man,' he added in a tone which showed that he was deeply moved, 'I can only say that I am truly grateful and thankful. It's a big business, and I want someone at hand whom I can trust, very badly indeed. Mind,' he added, 'I'm not afraid of anything that may happen—but I want a perfectly fair-minded man, who isn't afraid either, and that's what I feel you are. Now,' he went on, 'I'll have no secrets from you. Ask me any questions, and I'll answer them.'

'No,' I said, 'I won't ask for that. I know that you want an impartial observer. I can see that something very queer is going on in this house, but I won't ask questions; I'll draw my own conclusions, and then when you think it best you shall tell me.'

'That's right,' said Bendyshe, 'just what I want, and that's a bargain. If you will keep your ears and eyes open, it's all I ask. You may be surprised—you may even be shocked; but I can assure you that there is nothing to be afraid of—nothing whatever. We will just go our own way for a bit, and see how things turns out. Now, this letter,' he went on, slapping his

pocket, 'is the most important thing that has happened yet. Perhaps you will see the Vicar when he comes up, and tell him anything you have noticed, anything in the smallest degree unusual; and then leave us to discuss it—and thank you once again.'

While we were smoking, the Vicar arrived, and I saw that he looked perturbed. I left the two alone together, and half an hour later Bendyshe came to the library, and said that the Vicar and himself were obliged, owing to the news received, to go away on the following day.

'We shall leave immediately after breakfast in my car,' he said, 'and we shall be back for dinner, unless anything unforeseen occurs. It's very inhospitable, I know,' he added, 'and I don't feel sure if you will care to be so long alone. Have you anything in town that you want to do? Or you could easily spend the day at the Vicarage—that could be arranged. I'm afraid it is absolutely imperative for us to go.'

'Oh, don't bother about me,' I said. 'I will do what I am very fond of doing—go out for a long vague walk, get some food at a village inn, and be back in good time in the evening. It will do me good; and I can think over things a bit.'

'It's very good of you,' said Bendyshe, looking decidedly relieved.

The rest of the day passed quietly enough. We sat in the garden, and the only event that struck me was that one of the gardeners and the chauffeur, in the course of the afternoon, brought a ladder across the lawn and got it into the house with some difficulty.

Bendyshe was thoughtful and cheerful. We played a game after dinner, and he proposed an early adjournment.

I was glad to go to bed—the day had been one of some agitation. But when I had got to bed I could not sleep. I was seized with a kind of detective fever, and found myself speculating as to what the whole mystery could be. I did not believe very firmly in its supernatural character, and as for the occult side of it all, I may say I was frankly sceptical. It seemed to me that the Vicar and Bendyshe were probably affected by the tragic fate of Faulkner, and were perhaps inclined to attribute significance to circumstances of no great importance, but there were

evidently things which had yet to be told me. While I was pursuing this train of thought—it was now nearly one—I distinctly heard soft footsteps in the corridor. I went to the door, opened it very quietly, and looked out. I saw Bendyshe, in his shirt and trousers, carrying in his hand a lantern, walking very gently, his back to me, towards the staircase. He came to the door of the unfurnished room, drew a key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and went in, closing it with great precaution. I had a strong impulse to follow him, but thought that he might be annoyed at my intrusion; so I left my door half-open, and feeling restless and anxious, I put on some clothes, sat down in an arm-chair near the door, prepared to rise and close it the moment I heard the door of the unfurnished room open. I will admit that I was far from easy in my mind about this solitary exploration, but I had by this time a robust confidence in Bendyshe's strength of will. For a time I heard nothing; but then I began to perceive very faint muffled sounds overhead, as though Bendyshe (I supposed) was moving about slowly and cautiously, and perhaps searching for something that was not easily to be discovered—for there were long pauses between the sounds, as if the searcher were standing still.

I suddenly perceived what was happening. The ladder had no doubt been brought upstairs and put in the unfurnished room. Bendyshe was certainly using it to obtain access through the hole in the ceiling to some room or loft overhead, and was quietly investigating it at night, so as to be secure against interruption. I confess that the nerve which would be required for such a proceeding fairly amazed me, particularly when I thought of the supernatural influences Bendyshe clearly believed to be at work in the house.

I suppose that half an hour had passed thus, when suddenly I became aware that a very alarming interruption had happened overhead. Heavy footsteps stamped and rushed in the loft above me, then grew fainter, and then I heard the sound of a fall and a half-stifled cry from the direction of the unfurnished room. I rose and hurried down the corridor, flung open the door of the room and saw a sight which horrified me. The moonlight streamed in at the open window. Bendyshe was

sitting on the ground with his hands clasped on his forehead; beside him lay the extinguished lantern.

'What has happened, Bendyshe?' I said, hastening to his side. He unclasped his hands and looked at me, and I could see that blood was flowing on to his shirt.

'I have had an accident, old man,' said Bendyshe in rather a husky tone, 'but I'm not much the worse, I think. No, don't ask questions—just help me up.' I held out a hand and lifted him to his feet. He looked dizzily round. 'Good God, what a fool I was!' he said. 'I might have known it wouldn't do—here, Hartley, pick up that lantern, there's a good fellow, and come to my room with me. I don't think I'm much amiss, after all. I only hope to God that no one else heard. How did you know I was here? You came like lightning.'

'I saw you go in here,' I said, 'and I heard you overhead—and I had a feeling that I might be wanted.'

We went into the passage; I passed my arm through his, and he seemed glad of the support. He turned on the electric light in his room and I followed him into the bathroom. He was very pale, his hair disordered; the wound turned out to be at the base of his throat, a scratch or cut, torn and lacerated. He bathed it, and it proved not to be very deep. 'I must have caught my neck on the broken edges of some of the laths,' he said. 'Well, I'm thankful it's no worse.' He came back into his bedroom, and opened a small case which I saw contained some surgical appliances. He soaked a bit of cotton-wool in some disinfectant; and very deftly wrapped a bandage round his neck and under his arms, only asking me to fasten it for him. Then he dropped some liquid into a glass and swallowed it. 'Now, old man,' he said, 'you get to bed and let me have a sleep. I have got a long day tomorrow.'

'But you won't go in this condition?' I said.

'Yes, I must go,' he said, 'but Elton will drive. I shall be all right. I have just had a bit of a shock—I slipped on the ladder, you see, and I'm only thankful I didn't break a limb. Now go and get some sleep yourself,' he added—'you look as if you wanted it; and mind, don't be *excited*! Nothing more will happen tonight, you may be sure of that—I've had a lesson, anyhow!'

And so I left him, but lay long awake, pondering and speculating what had Bendyshe expected to find in the loft; and what had he found or seen that caused him to beat so hasty a retreat. For I knew enough of Bendyshe by this time to know that it must have been something of a very alarming or startling kind to upset him so.

VII

I was relieved to find in the morning that Bendyshe showed few signs of the adventure of the previous day. The man was as tough as steel! He limped a little, and the wound in his neck was stiff and uncomfortable; but he was cheerful, not with any assumed cheerfulness, but with the tranquil assurance of the soldier who has come out unexpectedly well from a dangerous affray. I saw that the element of danger, whatever it was, about the whole investigation was a stimulus to him rather than the reverse.

It was a fine cool day, and the Vicar and he started about ten o'clock. It was a four-hour drive, Bendyshe told me, and they hoped to be back at seven. 'If we are delayed,' he said, 'we will wire at once; and if you then don't care about staying here alone, the Vicar has arranged for his housekeeper to give you a cold supper at the Vicarage.' I wrote a letter or two, and telling Bartlett that I should be out for luncheon and probably for tea as well, I went off soon after eleven.

It was astonishing to find how much more cheerful and light-hearted I became on getting clear of the house. I had hardly realized how much the atmosphere of the place was weighing on my spirits. It was not what had actually occurred, for that was trivial enough. It was a feeling of suspense, of hardly knowing from hour to hour what might not happen.

I walked off into the country, delighting in the freshness of the green lanes, the views from higher ground, the pleasant villages and farms I passed through. I got some bread and cheese at an inn. The landlord was a chatty old man, amiably inquisitive. He asked where I had come from, and when I said from Hebden Hill, he brightened up. He knew Hebden well, it

seemed, and had some relations living there. Then he asked me if I knew the Manor-house. 'You mean the big house opposite the west end of the church?' I said.

'That's it, sir,' he said. 'Did you ever hear tell of Squire Faulkner?' he went on.

'Yes,' I said, 'I have heard the name—I think the Vicar mentioned it.'

'Ah! that would be Mr Fortescue,' he said. 'I knew him when I was a young man.' Then he went on in a rambling way, telling me about the Squire. 'They did say he done a murder, or next door to it, and he come out of the army, and he lived all alone at the Manor with an old soldier as had been in his regiment for his servant, and they carried on dreadful. People used to say that they cooked the mice and rats and ate them, and the drink going from morning to night. But there were worse stories than that, sir,' the old man went on, dropping his voice. 'Folk said the Squire had sold himself to you know who, sir, that ain't the one above—and that don't seem hardly worth while, do it? And if the Squire had an ill-will to anyone, he could bring all sorts of mischief to pass. I don't know rightly about it, sir, but it wasn't thought hardly safe to cross the Squire, and they used to say that the two would catch a cat, as it might be, and burn it alive, and then it would be like poison to the man the Squire had an ill-will to.

'And there was one bad story about a poor girl—a pretty girl she was, Annie Rogers by name, who lived with her mother that was a widow, and had a little money of her own. The old sergeant, it seems, took a fancy to her, and wanted her to marry him, but she couldn't abide the sight of him. That was hard enough, but then the Squire got wind of it, and thought that if the sergeant married her, he would lose his servant. And they had very high words about it, it was said. But the Squire went secret to work, and first old Mrs Rogers lost her bit of money and had to go out for jobs; and then she died; and Mr Fortescue was very good to Annie, and took her as a servant—but she was afraid of meeting the sergeant about the place; and one day the Vicar found him at the back door, speaking to Annie and frightening the girl with some nonsense; and the Vicar ordered him off, and the sergeant swore and that,

and the Vicar went after him to the gate. There were some people passing by who stopped to look on; and the Vicar kept quite cool, and said to the sergeant in a loud voice that he was going to say before them all what he thought of him; and he said he was a dangerous and drunken ruffian—those were his words—and that if he ever annoyed the girl again, he would have him up before the magistrates and they would put him where he would have to hold his tongue.

'The sergeant kept quiet after that for a long time; some of the Hebden men liked him well enough, for he could be very friendly when he chose, and could tell a good story. But poor Annie fell ill after that, and the Vicar sent her to the seaside, but she died for all that—they said it was a decline.'

The old man stopped for breath. 'But if the Squire was like that,' I said, 'and if the people believed all this about him, did they never show him what they thought of him?'

'Well, not for a long time, sir,' said the old man. 'You see, he was a cousin of the Vicar's, and the Vicar used to stand up for him. Some of the men in the place went one day to the Vicar and complained about the Squire; and the Vicar said to them, "It isn't the Squire," he said, "as does the harm—it's your fear of him. The worst harm he can do is to make you afraid of him—it's the fear does the rest." That was a true word, sir. But a little while after that, some of the same men, who had been having a bit of a drink, went up to the Manor, and began shouting under the windows, and beating on cans, and carrying on. And some of them threw stones and broke some of the windows—the Squire would never have them mended afterwards, but boarded them up. Someone saw and told the Vicar, and he ran down, but before he got there, the big door flung open, and the Squire, he marched out, and stood on the steps between the gateposts. "Here I am," he says, without turning a hair, and they say his face was dreadful to look upon, all white, with his eyes flaming; and then he called them cowards, brute beasts, and a lot of things that it wouldn't be hardly proper for me to repeat nor for you to hear. And he invited them to do what they liked to him. But no one dare lift a finger. "There," he said, "you daren't so much as speak." And someone in the crowd piped up at that and called him a hard

name. "Oh, so that's what you think," said the Squire; "and if you weren't such a little cur, I'd ask you to step out here, and do you the honour of knocking you down." And then he stopped short, and said, "But there's a better way than that!" and he looked about him, they say, like a devil, and then they began to slink away, one by one; and some of them began to run. And that was the end of that evening's work. But would you believe it, sir, Billy Dale—that's the one that spoke—within a week went clean crazy, and was took away; and after that they left the Squire alone.'

I felt that I had perhaps better not listen to more of these tales. I did not know how much was fact and how much fiction. But it was clear that the Squire was a man suspected of unspeakable things, and not without some reason. I began to feel that the best course would be to forget all about them. But then, why was Bendyshe so hot on the scent; and suddenly, like a flash of lightning, the truth, or what seemed the truth, dawned upon me. The evil was not dead; it was alive and active; and Bendyshe was trying to drag it to the light. Evil, of course, was anywhere and everywhere. But had something been done, did something remain in the house, that formed as it were a guarded stronghold of evil? Was there a core of malignant influence which needed to be extirpated? And if so, by what hideous personal agency, what bodiless ministers of fear was it perpetuated?

And then it dawned upon me that if there was any truth in my thoughts, Bendyshe must be exposed to dangers of a kind that defied precaution, and the more courageous he was, the nearer he got to the goal, the more appalling was the danger. I could not quite understand what part the Vicar was playing in all this. He was standing by Bendyshe—that was clear; but I thought that his kindly and generous nature might perhaps blind him to the danger, by leading him to believe that things had never been so bad as were supposed. In any case my duty was clear: I must stand by Bendyshe at any risk, and share the danger with him. It was a contest of wills, perhaps; and I could possibly, by throwing my own will into the scale, turn the current against our adversaries. And in any case I felt that I must not be left any longer in the dark, but must know exactly

what had happened, and what had induced Bendyshe to embark on the quest.

I wandered on in the grip of these thoughts, hardly knowing where I went; I felt for a moment that I ought to return at once to the house—that I was like a sentinel deserting his post; but, on the other hand, I felt that it might be simply foolhardy and reckless to go back and wait in solitude until Bendyshe and the Vicar returned, and that some experience might befall me which would mar or damage such effectiveness as I might possess.

I got a cup of tea at an inn which proved to be about five miles from Hebden; and then I strolled quietly back, arriving about seven. To my relief the car caught me up about half a mile out of the village. Both Bendyshe and the Vicar looked tired, and were very grave. I talked vaguely about my wanderings, and they gave me but scanty attention.

When we got to the house, I said to Bendyshe, 'If the Vicar is not too tired, would he come back to dinner?—I have a special reason for asking this. I have something to tell you and some further questions to ask.' The Vicar assented, and Bendyshe and I entered the house together, while the Vicar pledged himself to return at eight.

Bendyshe went to the smoking-room, and flung himself down in a deep chair. 'Any the worse for yesterday?' I said.

'Oh, I'm stiff as a board, and dog-tired,' he said rather impatiently, 'and just when I had need of all my strength; but we have found what we wanted to know, and it is all as I expected, only worse; and now the whole business is in such a tangle that I hardly know what to do!' Then he added, 'Why were you so keen that the Vicar should come back? He has had a shock, and seems to me done up.'

'I couldn't help it,' I said; 'today I have thought it all out, and I'll stick to you through thick and thin; but I feel that I must know all, and know at once. If I am to share a danger, I must know what the danger is; I can't be of any use if I am still groping in the dark.'

'Yes, you're right,' said Bendyshe wearily. 'I have been feeling that too—but I wanted you to form your own opinion.'

When we went up to dress, Bendyshe said, looking round, 'I

don't like the feel of the house tonight, old man. There's mischief brewing of a bad kind—but we'll weather it out!' I was conscious too myself of a sort of heavy and brooding stillness everywhere; but I saw and heard nothing.

VIII

At dinner, while the servants were in the room, we did our best to talk of indifferent matters. It was like a bad play, I thought. When we adjourned to the smoking-room, Bendyshe said to the Vicar, 'Here, Vicar, Hartley says that he thinks he had better have the whole story, and I agree with him. He won't be taken by surprise; and it's no use pretending now that it is a mild sort of investigation; it's a battle of a bad kind, and we must be forearmed, if we can. I made a mistake last night by taking the offensive—and now hell's loose— But I'll go ahead.

'It was about three years ago that the thing began,' said Bendyshe. 'I don't know why it didn't begin before—perhaps it *had* begun; but I had been getting more and more interested in my problem, and I had been, I suppose, training my perceptions without knowing it; and the curtain went up with a run. I ought to say that when I first settled in here, I had taken the unfurnished room for my study. But I could never work there in any peace. There seemed to be something on the move there, and if I sat at the table, I used to feel there was someone behind me; and there were odd noises overhead too. I had the roof examined—the only way in was through a little trapdoor in the ceiling, in the corner where the plaster came down —but above, there was only a long, low loft, lit by a window looking out on the tiles and gutters, with a cistern in it and waterpipes, and the builder said that the noises came from the pipes.

'However, one day I was coming down the corridor, I saw a man standing by the door of the room—the same man, Hartley, I will tell you at once, that you saw up there, the same dress, the same sort of expression. I thought it must be a plumber for a moment; when it suddenly came upon me with a rush that the wall, so to speak, was broken down, and I had seen some-

thing that a normal healthy man has no business to see. I said out loud, "What are you doing there?—who are you?" but he took no notice of me whatever, and continued to stand by the door, like a man who wanted something badly, and had been trying for a long time to get it, but all in vain. I didn't think of it as being in any definite and actual way connected with the place—I thought it was an hallucination produced by overtasking my nerves in one direction. I went along to the door, my eyes fixed on the man, and suddenly he was gone. I wasn't exactly frightened, but I felt uneasy about myself. I went up to town and saw a doctor, a friend of mine. He sounded me and questioned me up and down; then he declared me perfectly well in every way. I told him about my studies, and he asked me if I had ever seen any such figure in real life, in childhood, or had any fright or shock connected with such a figure. But I couldn't think of anything. He told me at last that he was frankly puzzled, but that he had little doubt that it was an hallucination, and did in some way result from my thinking so much about such phenomena. He gave me the advice to turn to other occupations for a bit, limit my work, have more company in the house—all very sensible.

'I did just what he advised, and had a succession of guests here, who bored me to death; and I took up constitutional history, as the least exciting subject I could find. But a fortnight later I saw the thing again, this time in my study, looking up at the trap-door. I got up, and walked straight up to him—and the same thing happened; he took no notice of me whatever, and when I was within a foot of him, disappeared.

'Then I did what I ought to have done before; I went to the Vicar and told him the whole story—and then it came out. The Vicar told me, with a good deal of hesitation, that the figure I described was beyond all doubt the figure of Hugh Faulkner himself, just as he looked in his later years. Wasn't that so?'

The Vicar nodded. 'It was unmistakable, your description! And it gave me a dreadful shock, though I can't say I was exactly surprised.' Then the Vicar turned to me and said, 'Of course, Mr Hartley, I am a firm believer in the immortality of the spirit; and I believe that we preserve identity and intel-

ligence, and are not much affected or altered by death; but the spirit is, of course, a bodiless thing—a conscious and intelligent influence. I want to make this clear. There was nothing *material* there to see; but I realized that Bendyshe had somehow or other got within the range of Faulkner's thought, and that the figure was evolved out of this thought acting on Bendyshe's mind, just as we evolve figures in our dreams.'

'Yes,' said Bendyshe, 'but I was also aware that Faulkner was not consciously influencing me—in fact, I think he was wholly unaware of my existence then; and this was a great relief to me—I was simply a spectator of what was going on, just as you were when you saw him. In fact, if I may say so, I doubt if it was *his* mind acting on yours which made you see him. I think it was *my* mind. And then,' he went on, 'I saw the figure pretty often. But never in the presence of anyone else—that seemed an absolute bar, I don't know why. I lost all fear of it, and just accepted it as a fact. Once or twice I saw it in the garden, and once or twice downstairs, but almost always in the corridor upstairs, or in the empty room. But I didn't want to run any risks. So I had the trap-door plastered up, moved the furniture out, and locked the place up.

'Meanwhile I speculated about it, and discussed it with the Vicar; and we came to the conclusion that there was some particular thing that Faulkner was—I won't say looking for exactly, but trying to trace, some book, perhaps, or manuscript —I couldn't make it out—but we decided at last that it was something which someone else had hidden; but was it in the house at all? Or if so, why couldn't he see it? Or if he could see it, what could he do with it? I don't believe that these spirits have any material powers at all—they can only act through living brains.'

I turned to the Vicar. 'Did you ever see the figure?' I said.

'No,' he said, 'I did not—I don't know why. I was nearer to Faulkner than anyone living, except his servant. But I have thought that perhaps Faulkner wished to conceal the very existence of the thing, whatever it is, from me, and was careful not to bring me in.'

'But why then did Bendyshe see him?' I asked.

'Oh,' said Bendyshe, 'I stumbled into it by accident, I believe

—it was just a question of my power of perception being heightened.'

'But let me ask one other thing,' I said: 'How do you account for your seeing it only occasionally? If the thing is always in Faulkner's mind, you ought to see it constantly.'

'Well,' said Bendyshe, 'we don't know what his mental occupations may be—I daresay he has other things to think of.'

'Yes, indeed,' said the Vicar, shaking his head; 'he was a very self-willed and perverse man—he has much to learn.'

Bendyshe gave a grim smile, and went on, 'What I believe is this—that at times the spirit of Faulkner remembers this thing, whatever it is, and believes it to be still in this house. The result is that for a time his thought is occupied with the house and the familiar rooms; and being an abstract essence, it ranges about the well-known scene; and if one comes within the reach of it, one sees the figure automatically.'

'But why, then, does the figure disappear when you come close to it?'

'Ah, I don't know everything,' said Bendyshe; 'indeed, there is much that quite baffles me. But I have thought that it may be in some way obliterated by the proximity of my own consciousness, as the moon obliterates the light of the surrounding stars—but that is only my idea.

'And now,' he went on, 'we come to the more serious part of the story. Some weeks ago I became suddenly aware that the spirit of Faulkner had become aware of mine. I suppose I had begun to speculate more closely as to where the lost thing was, and what it might be. And then, too, it had occurred to me that the old sergeant might be still alive—the Vicar had told me that he thought he was dead—and I had begun to make some enquiries, and had employed a detective to try to trace the man. We now know that he was alive all the time. Faulkner had given him some money at various times, and after Faulkner's death the sergeant had rented a farm in Hampshire, a little bit of a place; but he had taken to drink, and was in a bad way, nearly at the end of his resources. He became aware that he was being tracked, and I daresay there were plenty of other things about which he might have got into trouble. Anyhow, he was frightened. He sold his farm, which was mortgaged, so he only

got a few pounds out of it; and he went off on the tramp. The money was spent at last, and he took cold by sleeping in the open air; he was taken to the workhouse at Pentlow, near Horsham, and went to the infirmary with rheumatic fever.

'But I must go back for a moment. While all this was going on, I became aware, as I told you, that I had for some reason or other come within Faulkner's consciousness, and that he realized that someone was on the same scent as himself. His expression seemed to me to change when I saw him, he looked angry and defiant, and as though he was guarding the approach to something. But even so he was not apparently at first conscious of my physical presence. Then he assumed a menacing air, and made gestures of anger and rage. It was at this time that I asked you to join me here, because I began to feel that I *must* have someone with me—that I could not be sure of my nerves not failing me; moreover, his appearances became much more frequent.

'And then you came, but instead of telling you everything at once, which would have been by far the best course, I waited, in order to see whether you had any perception of his presence; and when you began to notice certain phenomena, I made excuses and gave explanations—it was all very stupid—in order that you might have your own experiences and draw your own conclusions.

'And then a quite new development occurred. The old sergeant died in the workhouse, and the first intimation of it that I got was the appearance of a new figure at the window, which you also saw. I did not know what to make of this, though I had a strong suspicion; but it happened that they found on the man a letter from someone in the village—one of his old acquaintances—which seemed to show that he had lived here; and then they wired to the Vicar to say that an unknown man had died in the workhouse—they gave a brief description of him—who seemed to have once lived at Hebden. The Vicar sent the wire on to me, as you know, and I was sure who it was; we went off together to identify him, and the Vicar recognized him at once. That is the position of affairs.'

'But,' I said, 'in what way is he connected with these papers, or whatever they are?'

'Do you remember,' said Bendyshe, 'that the Vicar said something about a despatch-box that was missing after Faulkner's death?'

The Vicar turned to me. 'I ought to have been more explicit,' he said. 'For some time before his death, I noticed that Faulkner was always writing when I saw him, and that when I came in, he always slipped the papers into an old despatch-box on the table, and locked them up. I remember once asking him what he was writing. "My memoirs," he said with an ugly kind of smile—"an interesting book, don't you think?" When he died, I am nearly certain that the box was by his bedside, though I could not swear to it; and we thought—the lawyer who came down to see about the property and I—that there might be papers of importance in it; but when we questioned the sergeant, who knew the box perfectly well, he stuck to it that he hadn't seen the box for the day or two preceding Faulkner's death, and that he was quite certain that Faulkner had hidden it somewhere—and I couldn't be sure that he was not right.'

'Yes,' said Bendyshe, 'and what I conjecture happened was that the sergeant, thinking that the contents of the box might be valuable, or indeed might incriminate himself in some way, had secured it himself, meaning later to remove it. That would explain everything—it would explain why Faulkner did not seem to know where it was, and further it would explain what happened to me there last night.'

'What exactly did happen?' I asked.

'I'll tell you,' said Bendyshe, looking up at me, 'just how it was. I had had a ladder brought up here. Whether the fall of the plaster was purely accidental, I don't know, but anyhow it gave me the idea that the papers had been hidden up in the loft. I didn't like to ask you to join me, Hartley, but I did a very rash and idiotic thing. In the afternoon, I took the ladder into the room, and when the house was all quiet, I went in with a lantern and up into the loft. At first all was quiet, and I hunted about everywhere, but found nothing. Then suddenly I became aware that I was not alone, and I saw two figures standing together in the far corner of the loft looking down at the boarded floor. And then I felt no doubt at all that I had got near the hiding-place. I had better have gone away at once, and

bided my time; but instead, I was fool enough to go to the place. I don't quite know what happened. They flew at me like two wild beasts. It was not a case of any physical violence—it was just a contest of will and brain; but I had all the terror of being attacked, without the possibility of offering any physical resistance. I simply felt that my mind would give way. I ran down the loft, and tried to get on to the ladder; but I slipped when I was half through the hole, cut my neck, I suppose, on the jagged edges of the broken laths; and you heard my fall!'

'What an appalling business!' I said—and there was a silence for a moment. Then I said, 'But why did the sergeant not remove the box after Faulkner's death?'

'Ah! I can explain that,' said the Vicar. 'He had not the time. We had moved Faulkner's body into another room, and we had some talk with the sergeant, Mr Hartley, and I suppose he was frightened. He had got hold of a certain amount of money, as it was; and I imagine he never dared to come back.'

'There are just two things more,' I said: 'what *are* these papers, after all?'

'Ah! that I don't know,' said Bendyshe; 'but I imagine that they are what Faulkner called his experiments—an account of what he did, or tried to do, and the devices by which he carried them out. The force he used was fear, and the question is, how can you frighten people purely through the agency of the mind? We must remember that Faulkner was a very able man, and that the sergeant was clever enough in his way too—and that they were both men of remarkable courage and force of character.'

'And if we grant that,' I said, 'what do they want to do with the papers?'

'My belief,' said Bendyshe, 'is that they just want to guard them—to preserve them somehow. I don't think they have a very clear idea about them. They don't want them to be made public, and yet they want to hand on their secrets to someone who will use them. If any of us three, for instance, were a man inclined to make use of these evil agencies, we should encounter no opposition; but at present they simply know that we are hostile, that we want to find the papers, and perhaps to put

an end to them; and this they mean to prevent as well as they can.'

'What are we going to do?' I said.

'I am afraid that the question rather is,' said Bendyshe, 'what are *they* going to do?'

The words were hardly out of his lips when an answer came —a thin high mocking laugh was heard in the air, in the middle of us. I can't say how inexpressibly horrible it was, to feel in the presence of something hostile and derisive, and yet not to know what it could do or might do. The horror was that it was *there*. The silent auditor knew what we had said and what was in our minds; and we could do nothing. It seemed to me for a moment as if I should lose control of myself, and that my brain would give way under the consciousness of this unseen and intangible presence. I looked at Bendyshe, and he was sitting clasping the arms of his chair, looking down and frowning.

The Vicar rose unsteadily to his feet, his face very pale. 'Merciful God,' he said, 'here have I been fighting with evil all my days, and trying to think it was weaker than good—and now that I am confronted with it, I can do nothing—nothing.'

'No,' said Bendyshe, looking up; 'that isn't so, Vicar! You have a far stronger hold of this business than either Hartley or myself. We are just fighting for ourselves and our sanity, but you have got bigger forces with you. I want to ask you one thing: Hartley and I—or I—must go and find this thing, whatever it is—*and there's no time to be lost!* The longer we put it off, the worse it will be. But will you stay with us, and see the end? Whatever happens, you must not lose faith.'

When Bendyshe spoke of the necessity of our going straight to our goal and without delay, I confess that I had an access of fear more terrible than anything I had ever experienced. The blood seemed to stand still in my brain—my strength seemed to ebb from me; but I felt too that the idea of giving up, of turning tail now, would leave even a worse legacy of terror behind. It was not a question of moral courage—there simply was no way out.

The Vicar said nothing in reply, but he put up his hand—clasped first Bendyshe's and then mine. And the next minute

we were out in the hall. Then Bendyshe took command.

IX

We had risen, and stood looking at each other in silence.

'Now, don't hurry,' Bendyshe said. 'Try just to think of what we are going to do. I shall want something to prise up the boards with. I know!' He went back to the smoking-room, and returned in a moment with an old ice-axe. Its blade was protected by a leathern cover, and Bendyshe slipped it off. Then he strode to the foot of the stairs and went deliberately up; I followed him, and the Vicar followed me. In a moment we were on the landing. The house was deathly still, with a brooding stillness, like that of a thunder-cloud. Bendyshe drew out his key, and produced two electric torches from his pocket, and then said, 'Now, I go first, because I know where the thing is; and when I am up the ladder—in the loft, Hartley—you come up; and, Vicar, will you stay in the room, and lend a hand? And mind this—they can do *nothing* so long as we don't fear them; or if we do, we must behave as if we did not.'

Then he unlocked the door, and we went into the room. Bendyshe clicked on both the electric torches, and gave one to the Vicar. The moon was shining bright, and the shadow of the casements lay dark on the floor.

Then I suddenly became aware of a strange shadow, of an impenetrable blackness, in the corner of the room under the trap-door. But Bendyshe strode out straight to the foot of the ladder, and seemed to me for a moment engulfed in darkness. I followed close behind; and there was nothing there. 'You see,' said Bendyshe to me in a low tone—'it will all be like that.'

But as we stood together at the foot of the ladder, a stream of ice-cold air came gushing down from the hole in the ceiling, as if coming out of some frozen cave, so cold that I felt my very bones shivering under their covering of flesh. But Bendyshe slipped his hand through the loop of the axe, and then very slowly and deliberately began to ascend the ladder. 'Come when I call,' he said, 'and not before.' I looked round: the Vicar was on his knees in prayer; but neither that nor Bendyshe's courage gave me any relief. I just thought of the next thing I had to do.

Bendyshe disappeared through the hole, and I heard him step out on the floor of the loft. Then he said, 'Now come!' The Vicar held his torch up to illuminate the steps of the ladder, and step by step I went slowly up in the icy air.

As soon as my head and shoulders were in the loft, I felt Bendyshe grasp my arm. 'Steady,' he said, 'step carefully.' Bendyshe raised his torch, which sent a long stream of light down the loft, and then in the silence came a strange tremor and agitation of the empty air. 'Now,' said Bendyshe, 'it will be all over in a moment! Hold on to the top of the ladder, and keep your eye on me.' He walked slowly along the loft, to a place about twenty feet away, looking carefully at the boards and turning the torch down on them. 'Now,' he said, 'come up here slowly and hold the torch for me—this is the place!'

Bendyshe bent his head down, and examined the boards. Then he raised his axe and delivered a tremendous blow at the chink between the boards, and then another. The chips of the broken board flew out on the floor; suddenly from the hole he had made there was protruded a dusky thing. It was the head of a great snake; I could see its dull blinking eyes, the black spots that ran in a chain down its forehead, its flickering tongue, and the greenish pallor of its throat. Bendyshe struck another blow, and the creature came out, reared itself up as though to strike at us, and then as suddenly darted back into the hole again. Bendyshe again raised the axe, and struck fearlessly again. There was now a considerable hole between the boards, and he reversed the axe, inserted the point under the loose board, and putting his foot on the head of the axe brought it down like a lever; the board cracked and split; Bendyshe dropped the axe, and bending down seized the board and tore it up.

A dreadful sight met my eyes. The whole cavity was filled with snakes, entwining, interlocked, writhing; sometimes a head was put up from the mass, and sometimes half a dozen would detach themselves and wriggle over the floor. I must confess that I was now half frantic with horror. But Bendyshe plunged his hands into the mass of snakes, and drew out an old leather despatch-box covered with dust. 'This is it,' he said; and I was bending down to look at it, when a thing more dreadful than any of our previous experiences occurred. The

icy air beat upon us, and turning my head, I saw standing behind us, stiff and upright, a corpse, swathed in grave-clothes, with pale leaden-coloured hands hanging down; the face was of the same hue, with a fringe of ragged-looking grey hair straggling over the forehead. It had a faint smile, it seemed, on its lips, and its dull eyes, grey like chalcedony, looked fixedly at the opening in the floor; and then a heavy odour of corruption began to spread around us. And then for a moment I wished that I had died rather than have come into this place of horrors. Bendyshe himself turned, and confronted the gaze of the figure. Then he signed to me to pick up the torch and axe, and walked firmly down the loft to the ladder's head.

'Go down first,' he said, 'and I will lower the box to you—don't leave go of it, whatever happens.' And so I pushed on. It was no time to hesitate. I climbed hastily down the ladder, and on reaching the floor, saw the Vicar standing with his back to me, looking out of the window. But I had no time to attend to anything else, and cried out in a cautious tone, 'Now, the box'—and it appeared from the orifice. I seized hold of it, and a moment later Bendyshe began to descend the ladder. But when he reached me, I saw that his strength was failing. At that moment the Vicar turned round, and came up to me with outstretched hands as if to receive the box. I was about to hand it to him, when Bendyshe cried out in an unsteady voice, 'No, no—keep hold of it, I say—don't you see?'

And then I hardly knew for a moment what happened. Something seemed to rush towards me in a passion half of rage, half of entreaty. I was fighting with shadows. The figure that I had thought to be the Vicar came nearer and looked me in the face—and it was Faulkner himself, in a fury of baffled rage and despair, such as a human mind can hardly conceive; and while I gazed fascinated, I heard Bendyshe come close beside me; and the Vicar himself came forward out of the dark corner of the room, and after that I knew no more.

I awoke not long after from a kind of stupor. I was conscious of having been led and propelled down the corridor. I was in my bedroom, lying on my bed, and the Vicar was sitting beside me with a very anxious face. 'How do you feel?' he said in a gentle voice.

'Oh,' I said, 'I'm all right—in mind, that is; I feel very tired and battered, but not damaged, at least not irretrievably. What I most want is sleep, I think. I suppose I fainted?'

'Yes,' said the Vicar, 'and I was afraid it was worse; but don't let us talk about that now.'

'Where is Bendyshe?' I said.

'Oh, he is all right,' said the Vicar; 'he has just gone to get something for you. He will be here in a moment. He is very anxious, and so am I, that we should settle at once, without any delay, about these papers, whatever they are. But he and I disagree; and if you feel up to it, he would like to have your opinion.'

'I don't know that my opinion is worth much just now,' I said.

But at that moment Bendyshe entered the room with a little cut-glass flask in his hand. He showed few traces of an ordeal —indeed he looked more self-possessed and determined than ever. He carried the box with him, I noticed. He came to my bedside and took my hand. 'Well, old man,' he said, 'this is a good sight! I was afraid ... well, I won't say what I feared, but I felt that if things had gone wrong, I should never have forgiven myself for bringing you in. How are you feeling—only a faint, you think? Well, I am sure of it—heart, not brain, gave way.' He poured something out of the flask, a clear aromatic liquid, and asked me to drink it off. 'It is quite harmless,' he said. 'It will give you an extreme lucidity of mind for about half an hour, and then the best sleep you have ever had in your life.'

I drank it, and the other two sat in silence. A few minutes later I sat up and said, 'It is very strange—I could not have believed I could have felt like this. I can remember and see quite clearly all that happened yesterday—was it yesterday? But there's no horror about it. I feel extraordinarily happy—something poisonous seems to have cleared away, and I don't think it will come back.'

'Yes,' said Bendyshe, 'I think we have cleared the air somewhat—blown up the wasps' nest, perhaps! But now—do you feel fit to hear two sides of a question? These horrible papers —what is to be done with them? My own view is that

I should go through them carefully. They may have immense evidential value. Here is the packet.' He opened the despatch-box—I noticed that he had forced the lid—and took out a small packet of papers, not more than a hundred sheets, I guessed, carefully tied up with black ribbon, and sealed with two large seals. He put the packet in my hands. On the first page was written in a bold handwriting, *'A record of experiments made at Hebden Manor-house between the years 1890 and 1903, with the results obtained by Hugh Faulkner and Harry M'Gee. It is earnestly desired that anyone into whose hands they may come will have them examined by someone of scientific eminence, as they deal with the surprising development of a comparatively unknown psychical force, the results of which have been of an extraordinary character.'* It was signed *'Hugh Faulkner.'*

'Mind,' said Bendyshe, 'I will take the entire and sole responsibility for examining the packet; and I will add that if I had been able to find the packet unaided—as I think I should have done—I should have gone through the whole thing with the utmost care.'

'Bendyshe,' said the Vicar, very gravely—and I saw that he was in a state of great depression and exhaustion—'I implore you not to speak like this! If you had attempted to take possession of the packet single-handed, it would have cost you your reason, and perhaps your life. It may be that you would have lost something even more precious than life. And I must say something more, painful though it may be. You are not as strong as you think! You are in greater danger at the moment than you were in either of your two visits to that unholy place up there. My feeling is that the papers should be instantly destroyed. I regard them as I would regard a case which I knew to contain the living germs of all the deadliest diseases known to humanity. For you to read them would be deliberately to introduce into your own spirit the most satanical of all infections.'

Bendyshe listened to the Vicar's words with a look of ill-concealed impatience, and then turning to me, he said, 'Now, Hartley, it is for you to decide. The quest was mine, and it was the Vicar's duty to help me; but you are the volunteer, who

might have been a martyr, who made the search successful. I leave it in your hands.'

'Bendyshe,' I said, 'you have given me a dreadful task. I see what you feel about it, but I have no sort of doubt that the Vicar is right. We have torn the evil out by the roots, with terrible risks; and you would propose to plant it again for the sake of scientific curiosity?'

Bendyshe stood holding the packet in his hands.

'You would destroy knowledge which has been paid for by a man's soul,' he said.

'Yes,' said the Vicar, 'because it is the price of blood—and you dare not traffic with that!'

I looked up; and in a flash I saw, a little way from the group, the figure of Faulkner kneeling, his hands clasped and a look of agonized entreaty on his face. I lost control of myself. 'It must be destroyed at once,' I said, 'now and here!'

'Very well,' said Bendyshe, 'I yield—but I shall regret it all my life!' He said no more, but drew a knife from his pocket, cut the ribbon, drew out a mass of closely-written sheets, stuffed them loosely into the empty hearth, and set fire to the heap. The little pile flared up, and in five minutes was a glowing lump, the writing standing out in lines of fire; and a moment later it was nothing but ashes. And at that moment Bendyshe and the Vicar, who had been gazing at the fire, looked up; and they too saw the figure of Faulkner. But then a strange thing happened, and so swiftly that I can hardly say what it was—a figure in white, young, radiant, smiling, seemed to step up to Faulkner from behind, like a bringer of good tidings.

Bendyshe put his hand before his eyes. The Vicar clasped his hands together. 'The uttermost farthing!' he said in a tone of intense joy, 'and he departs thence—that is the mercy of God.'

Ash

by

RAMSEY CAMPBELL

No anthology of new weird stories could really be complete without a story from our finest living writer of such tales, Ramsey Campbell. It is pleasant to see his collection Demons by Daylight *now available in Britain, and other works of his should have appeared by the time this is published.*

Born and resident in Liverpool, Ramsey Campbell started writing while very young and his first efforts were a series of tales in the H. P. Lovecraft vein. A collection of these stories was published in America in 1964 by August Derleth's Arkham House. Since then, Ramsey has produced fewer tales in this style and concentrated more on his own unique brand of terror. He has appeared in almost every notable anthology and has had two more of his collections published in America.

After working for the Inland Revenue and the local library, Ramsey took up full-time writing in 1973. He is a film critic for Radio Merseyside and lectures on the subject at conventions and evening classes. A past president of the British Fantasy Society, he also contributes a regular review of comics for the BFS journal. He has now written a full-length horror novel, The Doll Who Ate His Mother.

'Ash' is one of Ramsey's typical stories. If, by some remote chance, you have yet to encounter his work, then I can promise you a treat indeed, for here is today's master of the ghost story at his spine-chilling best.

'You go on ahead and see to things,' Anthea had said. 'I'll see you at the weekend.' Remembering, Lloyd gnashed the gears as the house came into view, its bricks blushing in the sunset. Yes,

he could see to things: one mistake in signing a hotel register and she doubted him. The removal men had left at last; the house was tranquil, subdued as the faded orange of the bricks, the grass of the garden disturbed only by a dent where a table had leaned its weight on its leg. The few notes he'd taken on the Cotswold dialect struggled to rise from the seat beside him. He was satisfied enough with them, but it was Anthea's project on folk-tales, Anthea whom Brichester University had commissioned to compile the book, Anthea's money which had claimed the larger part of the house, while he was just a temporarily redundant journalist. And Anthea who'd insisted that they live together outside Brichester, of course. All right, he knew that the morality of sex was purely personal and therefore private: that was why she had run out past the hotel porter and his huge umbrella like a bedewed mushroom; but it wasn't sufficient reason. He kicked the car forward, towards the corner shop.

The shopkeeper's spring was rusty; he uncoiled laboriously upward behind the counter with a box of Kleenex. Dust lay on his crown of hair like ash on a fire in the morning. He and his customer turned to Lloyd like images mirrored on the plane of dust between them. 'You'll be new,' said the image behind the counter.

Perhaps he'd shown his ignorance of a local custom, Lloyd thought. He surveyed the bottles of disinfectant, crinkled packets of stockings, pegged protractors and set-squares, newspapers. 'Have you cigarettes?'

'I don't know if we'd have your brand.' But they had, Lloyd found, irritated then triumphant: he disliked affectation.

'And what's bringing you up here?'

'Well, cigarettes. Oh, down here, you mean?' The silent image had extracted a Kleenex and coughed red-eyed; the shop-bell rattled, muffled with dust, and the newcomers stood listening. Dear God, Lloyd thought, in a minute they'll all be crowding round like peasants from one of those Transylvanian villages at Shepperton. 'I'm doing research into local customs,' he said.

'That'll be nice,' said the shopkeeper.

'Should be interesting, that,' remarked one of the late-comers.

Look, Lloyd thought, I'm as bored as you are. There wasn't one accent he recognized from the tape.

'You're at number 37 then, are you?' someone asked.

A Kleenex hung lolling out of the box. 'You won't be living there alone?'

'Not for long.' Even Anthea couldn't expect him to lie about that.

'It's a tragic house, is that.' You're never Cotswold, Lloyd thought accusingly.

'I can remember the day she left him as clear as yesterday,' the shopkeeper said.

'Aye, but he wouldn't lose his sleep over that, I reckon. If that woman thought she was badly done to she'd turn on you in the street. Anyone, mind you, and you didn't know her from Adam.'

'He was as bad after she left, though, remember. We had to complain in the end. He left the next day.'

'Well,' Lloyd said, 'I'll see you sometime.' Muddy boots vacated their prints for him. The bell's tongue trembled, thick. He parked the car in the alley behind the street and walked back; as he glanced up the road which joined the street opposite his house the street-lamps opened unblinking eyes and led his gaze to a gap of darkness. He'd already forgotten the shop; he scarcely thought he needed to make notes.

He set the recorder on the hall table by the telephone and hung up his coat. 'Anthea?' he called, hurrying upstairs. How odd! he thought, halting. I must miss her more than I thought. For a second he'd been sure that she was hiding, ready to leap on him—but she would have considered that undignified. His fingers traced a splinter recessed in the banister.

Somewhere something was burning; the air was faintly acrid. He ran downstairs and threw open the door beneath the staircase. But beyond the rakes, the lawnmower brown with rust and brittle strands of grass, the beach of scattered coal, the furnace door hung open and disclosed a cold hole. No smoke betrayed the kitchen; the cooker and refrigerator stood sharp on the red stone flags. He looked into the sitting-room. The furniture sat stolidly in the dim light from the street; key-holes on the face of the Victorian clock were nostrils, unbreathing;

on the mantelpiece a black marble hand rough and wrinkled with dust had been moved towards the door by a removal man. Lloyd thought it ugly, but left it where it was; Anthea might find it interesting.

He wandered upstairs. At the bedroom door he knocked and entered. Now listen, he told himself furiously, twice is too much. It's Tuesday, only four days to the weekend. Against the brown wallpaper which soaked up the light the bed stood, almost puritanically white. He returned to the kitchen and began to beat an omelette. Later he would ring Anthea.

But her telephone purred complacently. Eventually he shrugged into the mirror and set down the receiver. He cleaned out the mouthpiece, which was clogged with dust or ash, and took notes and recorder to bed with him, distributing them on Anthea's side. When he found that he'd somehow erased the tape, he swore bitterly; all he could hear was the faint muttering of a woman's voice, one that he didn't even recognize.

Anthea said: 'I trust you're eating well? The University seems quite excited by the sample notes I gave them. Lonely without you, but only for three days by the time you read this. Ring me tonight to let me know you're surviving.'

As he read the bacon charred. However, he hid it in the bread and ate it while he reread Anthea's letter. The morning newspaper had arrived with the compliments of the corner shop. He supposed he would have to thank them, but it would be an effort: 'Mrs Jenner and Mrs Wolsey gave a talk on Spain and showed slides at the Free Trade Hall; Mrs Cooper won first prize in the Swiss roll competition.' Thank heaven he was only an observer, and transient. Where they drew their folk-tales from he couldn't fathom. Certainly not from their imaginations, which must have starved to death decades ago.

In the hall a moth fluttered across from the sitting-room and came to rest on the mirror above the telephone. Grass was springing erect to conceal the dent in the lawn. The lampposts perspired. A moth, or something grey.

'Nice day,' said the man at the first cottage. 'Not so nice for the farmers,' said his wife, and discussion ensued. Even if they

could reach back to folk-tales, they weren't prepared to yield them up to Lloyd. He left the notebook and recorder in the car, near a Tudor church sheltering gargoyles with eroded faces, and began to climb a shattered path past wire-netting cages of clockwork hens. But in the askew hillside cottage, beneath a light-bulb which seemed sensitive to a personal gravity, all he could call forth was a ten-year-old pitchfork murder which he could have found in a dozen newspaper files. Perhaps his research had been discussed in a pub and rejected, or perhaps there was no more material to retrieve. So long as Anthea realized he'd done his best.

Dabbing milk from his lips, he picked up the receiver and stared blankly at the blank wall. Moth and mirror had vanished. Surely he'd locked the front door. Yes, of course he had. He pushed open the sitting-room door and the furniture lit up with what light wasn't lost to the walls; over the mantelpiece hung only a rectangle of unreflecting wallpaper. If this is village pilfering it's another yardstick of their intelligence, Lloyd thought angrily. He crossed to the window to examine the fastenings; within the pane the furniture hung isolated in darkness. He turned uneasily. He'd been brushed by the thought that now he couldn't see behind him. Not that it mattered. He peered into the bathroom; the mirror was still peeling with steam from his bath. The wings of the dressing-table mirror were closed across its face, and refused to give way. He shook at them and wrenched. Suddenly they swung open, crashed back against the wall, and his helpless reflection exploded and collapsed into an avalanche of glass.

Anthea answered the phone on the third pulse. 'How's the field trip?' she asked.

'Reasonably successful. But of course the recorder's broken down. I've taken it for repair.'

'That's a pity. Can't be helped, I suppose. How are you managing generally?'

'Perfectly well. The house is in shape.'

'I managed to get out of the Head of Philology's dinner date this time.'

'Well, that's encouraging. Anthea? Are you still there?'

'Yes, I'm still here. Is someone there with you?'

'Not that I know of.'

'It must be the operator. Anyway, we'd better not accumulate a phone bill just yet. Oh, Lloyd, if you're not having much success with the natives, I'll take over the difficult ones at the weekend. I'm missing you.' She sounded a little surprised. 'Ring me tomorrow,' she said.

He unhooked the microphone from his ear and carried the tape-recorder upstairs. But his voice was louder than Antheā's, and the second time he played back their conversation he could hear only what he might have said. Besides, he must have omitted to erase; in the background the anonymous woman's voice of last night muttered obsessively, sometimes coming close, almost shouting Anthea down, but still incomprehensible. He switched off the recorder and fell asleep.

Next morning he checked the doors and windows before breakfast. They hadn't betrayed him, and the only hint of activity in the house was a flight of scraps of ash which fluttered towards him as he opened the sitting-room door. On an impulse he descended into the cellar, but the only door other than that through which he'd entered was the door of the furnace. In any case, if anyone had entered through the cellar they would have been wary of the clatter of the scattered coal yet might well have tripped over one especially large piece just beneath the furnace door.

As he pried eggs loose from the pan, he heard the click of the letter-box. A letter from Anthea, perhaps. He slid the eggs on to a plate and hurried into the hall. Before he reached the hall, however, an odd thought troubled him; he couldn't remember having heard the letter strike the mat. He peered at the sliver of light which was trying to slip beneath the front door. But except for a few flurried flakes of ash which had drifted from the sitting-room, the hall was empty. Lloyd returned to the kitchen, catching at thoughts. Perhaps, on the point of delivering the morning paper, someone had realized that he'd shown no interest. Wait a minute, though: wasn't the newspaper a weekly? Perhaps it was; in any case, he couldn't find it in the house.

The day proved unsuccessful. Few cottages were roused by his knock, and those few offered only tales of someone else who'd seen a headless horseman. Late in the afternoon the recorder choked to death on a fragment of ash. Lloyd parked the car and walked back to the house. In the hall a light was extinguished—drew back, rather, as he overtook the reflection of the street-lamp. He wondered whether Anthea would drive down on Friday night or on Saturday morning. Well, he could ask, he didn't need to seem too eager.

He twisted the key in the lock and turned the doorknob. Halfway, it tried to turn back beneath his fingers, as if on the other side a weak child were playing a feeble joke. Irritated, he wrenched the door open. He must remember to oil the mechanism.

Though the telephone was stubborn, he finally reached Anthea. 'First of all, when are you coming down?' he asked.

'Hello?' she said.

'Hello. When are you coming down?'

'Who is this?' Anthea demanded.

Lloyd sneezed, and the ash retreated. 'Well, it's not the Head of Philology,' he said.

'Listen,' Anthea said, her voice cold as the receiver. 'I don't know who you are or what you want, but I don't believe a word of it. I obviously know Lloyd a great deal better than you do, which I suspect is not at all.'

'Anthea?' Lloyd pleaded, beating off the ash which swarmed about his face like flies.

'Go to hell!' Anthea shouted, and was gone.

When he set the receiver down at last, cursing village telephone exchanges and village bigots, Lloyd realized that he had to know where the ash was coming from. He had never lit a fire; he'd thought that the removal men had produced the ash in the sitting-room grate. But when he examined the grate he found no sign of a new fire; only the track of restless ash towards the door, and, lying palm down and crawling with ash near the grate, the ancient marble hand from the mantelpiece. He was sorry that it hadn't broken when it fell. After he'd searched the house twice for smoke, he persuaded himself to go to bed. At least the bedroom was free of ash, except for one

shred which must have clung to his cheek and now had settled on the pillow. In the last muffled minute before sleep he thought he heard the dull clang of a metal door, distant enough to be outside the house.

He couldn't remember what the dream had been. Twice he had awakened, coughing away a glimpse of something dark that rolled towards him. When he returned from the bathroom, his hand came away black from the bedroom doorknob. He ate breakfast slowly, dovetailing thoughts. Then he made his way to the corner shop.

'Yes, once she left him he turned out to be as bad,' the shopkeeper said, blotting an incontinent cup of tea with a newspaper. 'No thought for others at all, he hadn't. Two days after she went he was burning things in the furnace. Her stuff, I suppose. We couldn't stand the smell, do you remember?'

'You're right there,' said the newcomer, unannounced by the mute bell. 'You and me and Tom went round and told him about it. He was sorry enough, I'll say that for him. Even if he did keep it burning half the night. And the next day, he'd gone.'

'Yes,' Lloyd said. 'He would have.'

'Sad,' the newcomer said, stamping cracked mud from his colourless boots. 'A sad house. You'll be all right, anyway. I see your friend's arrived.'

Lloyd surged with relief, then with anxiety. 'You mean she's up there waiting?'

'Waiting? No, I mean she's inside.'

'Inside the house,' Lloyd said dully, touching the only key to the house. 'What did you see?'

'Nothing I shouldn't ought to have. The postman put a letter through the box, see, but she must have pushed it out by mistake, because she waited a bit and opened the door and took the letter in. Don't worry, mate, I didn't see anything I shouldn't. Only her hand, and anyway she was wearing black gloves.'

'I'm glad of that,' Lloyd said, backing towards the door. But

he had to be sure. 'Thank you for the newspaper,' he told the shopkeeper.

'No, no, don't think of it. I'll put you down for next week's if you like.'

'I don't know if I'll be here that long,' Lloyd said and emerged, breathing unevenly. Perhaps they'd delivered the issue he already had and at the last moment had realized—but he couldn't go in again to ask. He sat in the car, staring at the sun knifed by a Tudor gable, and finally drove around the village. No hotel, no rooms to let. In any case, he had to tell Anthea what he intended. But the only intact public telephone failed to reach her; the bell at her number was measured and relentless, and nobody else knew where she was. He could still drive back to Brichester and catch her before she left. It wouldn't take more than an hour. Then he imagined himself trying to explain. That was not the way to keep Anthea. He would wait for her outside the house.

In the afternoon he coaxed forth a folk-tale over the paralysed tape-recorder. When he emerged from the cottage the sun was melting orange on the forested hills over which it was balanced. Anthea might be on her way. He drove fast; the tufted sun leapt, peered and fell back. Clouds of fire moved sluggishly in the windows of the house. Lloyd sat in the car at the end of the street opposite, and waited.

And when Anthea arrived, he would run across and tell her —what? Two stolen mirrors? No, he couldn't pretend he was playing detective. He took out the key and stared at it. The hand, the letter and the front door must have belonged to the next-door neighbour. He locked the car and entered the house.

In the kitchen he made coffee and set out another cup. He looked at his watch. Anthea must arrive soon. If she hadn't arrived by eleven he would sleep in the car. He stood up to make sure that all the lights were lit. The hall light blazed; the square of wall above the telephone was dull yet threatening; the dark scrap which hung from its corner must be torn wallpaper. The sitting-room furniture seemed darkened by the room, perhaps by dust. Or by ash: the floor was clean. Suddenly cold, Lloyd turned to leave, then whirled again. The marble hand was nowhere to be seen.

He began to hurry about the room, peering under chairs and into ill-defined corners. Then, in the cellar, the furnace door clanged.

Gripping the back of a chair, he strained his ears. At once he heard the soft dull exhalation of something thrown on a fire. Or perhaps it had been something charred and hollow cast out of the furnace. He moved through the cold intense light into the hall, and a car drew up outside.

It was Anthea, he knew. Almost he scampered to her. Almost, but he wasn't going to; he would deal with this himself. He inched open the cellar door and descended the first steps.

The light was on, but dim; ash clung to the bulb like insects on a rotting pear. The furnace door was shut; wings of shadow hung from the furnace, hiding the walls. At the bottom of the steps the floor and the coal were merged by darkness, but he could see fragments of coal coming alert with ash as the breeze of his descent brushed them. The garden implements were blurred in the corners. He hesitated on the last step; he should have left the cellar door open to draw in the light from the hall.

The cellar door opened.

He twisted about, teetering on the step. The door was opening stealthily; a bent strip of light probed into the cellar, throwing his stretched shadow across the coal, as far as the furnace door and one particularly large piece of coal. No, it wasn't a piece of coal; it was more like a charred football, rolling back and forth in a draught from the door, rolling at him as the ash rose swarming from the floor and the hall light went out.

Lloyd scrambled frantically up the steps, his nails catching at the stone. Something like brittle sand collected and piled on the back of his neck, on his arms. The dim choked light dragged him down, away from the black gap of the doorway. He reached the last three steps. The grey flakes were stinging his eyes, but he could make out that someone was hiding out of sight beyond the doorway, sneaking the shrivelled marble hand around the door-frame and groping for the cellar switch.

At that moment the doorbell rang.

Purged of thought, Lloyd threw himself at whoever waited

in the frame of darkness. There was nobody; he collided with the wall. Something fell to the floor by his feet. He kicked out and stumbled towards the front door. A soft mass gathered and hung in his path. He covered his face with one hand, choking, and clawed his way through; light fragments flew into his face like blind moths and settled on his cheeks. He threw open the front door and dragged it to behind him as Anthea began to speak.

When she saw his face, she ran to the car and helped him in. He gestured, coughing uncontrollably, and she drove through the flashing lines of street-lamps and into the hills. She stopped the car far out in the massed dark. But Lloyd was brushing at his sleeves, his face, his hands, until blood began to trickle through the clinging flakes, and it was some time before he could speak. 'One day I'll tell you what happened,' he said at last, 'but just now I want to be quiet.'

'Shall I drive somewhere?' she asked, subdued.

'Yes, but not back there. You're safe from that,' he said. 'To my flat. That's what I said. To my flat.'

The House of Vengeance

by

L. T. C. ROLT

Last year saw the republication of Sleep No More, *a classic book of ghost stories by L. T. C. Rolt (1910-1974) which first appeared in 1948, and the same imprint also issued* Lines of Character, *a collection of essays on railway travel. These two reissues show how many and varied were the interests of a man who was one of our leading experts on industrial archaeology.*

L. T. C. Rolt was co-founder of the Inland Waterways Association, and served on the Inland Waterways Redevelopment Advisory Committee. He was also founder of the Talyllyn Railway Preservation Society and served as the Society's vice-president. His published books spanned a unique range—Inland Waterways of England *(1950)*, A Pictorial History of Motoring *(1956)*, James Watt *(1962)*, The Aeronauts *(1966)*, *and* Victorian Engineering *(1970)*. *He also wrote children's books such as* Red For Danger *(1955)*.

Though he had never written a ghost story since Sleep No More, *he kindly contributed one to my anthology* The Thrill of Horror *(1975)*. *Shortly before his death L. T. C. Rolt completed another story which was never published; 'The House of Vengeance' is that story. It was the last such tale Rolt ever produced and I am very pleased indeed to be able to present it here.*

The bus from Hereford came to a stop in the somnolent square of the little Welsh border town. The sliding door clashed open and John Hardy, shouldering his haversack, followed two plump and basket-laden farmers' wives on to the pavement. It was a perfect spring afternoon; sunlight drenched the square and as

the clatter of the bus died away along the road towards Brecon the town's rudely interrupted peace was quickly restored. The cracked bell in the Victorian clock tower chimed twice. Three thirty, he would have to step it out, thought John, if he was to make the Priory Hotel at Llanvethney before darkness fell.

He was quite unfamiliar with this Welsh border country, but his friend Alan Brett had explained to him that the hotel where they had arranged to meet and to stay lay in a long and narrow valley on the other side of the Black Mountains. Alan knew these mountains like the back of his hand and had enthused to John so often about them that he had finally persuaded his friend to join him at the Priory Hotel for a week's walking holiday so that he could become more closely acquainted with their beauties. Because Alan had assured him he was fully equipped, John had not bothered to acquire any large-scale maps of the area. But he did not anticipate any difficulty in finding his way as a preliminary glance at his one small-scale map had shown a bridle road that led out of the little town, over a high mountain pass and so down into the head of the valley in which their rendezvous was situated.

Walking briskly, he had soon cleared the outskirts of the old town—it was little larger than a village, anyway—and set his face towards the encircling hills. He had done a great deal of walking in the Cumberland Fells and the Pennines and thought that, by contrast, the prospect before him, though it was pleasing enough, looked rather tame. Surely these gentle hills could not be the wild mountains that Alan had praised so highly. He had covered about five miles, however, when the way veered sharply to his right and began to climb steeply up the flank of a deep and narrow gorge. It was when he had climbed to the head of this gorge that he realized that the hills were merely so many stepping stones to the greater heights which they had hitherto effectually concealed.

A very different prospect now greeted him. He found himself upon the edge of a huge plateau of unenclosed upland, an expanse of short, springy turf tufted here and there with uncurling bracken fronds and starred with hundreds of sheep. From this plateau there rose majestically along the southern skyline the great gables of a range of mountains. A confirmed 'mountainy'

man, John found this prospect very much more to his liking and he strode out with a will along the track which he could see climbing ahead of him round the knees of the mountains in the direction of the head of the pass.

Meanwhile the range of the Brecon Beacons in the middle distance, which normally appeared blue and remote, had become darkly threatening, its outline sharply etched against a great wall of storm cloud which was rolling up the western sky behind them. Had he not been so intrigued with the new prospect and better acquainted with the vagaries of the Welsh border country, so experienced a walker could scarcely have failed to notice so obvious a threat of impending weather change.

When he had climbed to the head of the pass, he saw that the track swung away to his left to enter a narrow defile between two mountain bluffs. For a few moments John thought that the reason why it suddenly seemed to have become so dark and chilly was that the further of these two bluffs obscured the westering sun, throwing the pass into deep shadow. In fact, this dark flank of the mountain concealed from him the swiftly advancing storm wrack which had already swallowed up the sun.

It was just at this moment when he stood upon the threshold of the pass that, just as it seemed suddenly to grow dark so, as suddenly, he was seized by a wholly irrational and almost overmastering fear. John was not a timid, nor even a particularly imaginative man and in all his long experience of walking in lonely places he had experienced nothing like it. It had to do with something which awaited him on the other side of the pass. It was as if something monstrous lurked there and it required a conscious effort of will to resist the temptation to fly back to the remembered landscape he had left behind. The weather itself might have been in league with his unreasoning fears, for as he pressed stubbornly forward through the narrow defile the whole character of the evening seemed to change. It became difficult to believe in that sunlit square where he had alighted not three hours before. The sky had become totally overcast and every vestige of colour had drained out of the landscape to leave it as sombre as the sky. A sudden chill wind,

driving a scud of rain before it, blew through the pass into his face as through some draughty corridor in which a distant door had been thrown open. This forced him to lower his head and when he raised it again he found himself looking down into the head of the valley.

What he saw did nothing to assuage his misgivings. He thought he had never seen a more forbidding prospect. He might, he thought, have been looking down into the dolorous pit of some vast, abandoned quarry. The tops of the mountains that enclosed the valley were already hidden beneath curtains of hurrying cloud, but so steep were their slopes that all he could see of them were a succession of desolate screes surmounted by frowning crags and precipices already dark with rain. The clouds were rapidly coming down; already coils of white vapour were beginning to spiral among the higher crags. A sudden clatter of falling stones on the scree immediately to his right made him start and he looked up in time to see what looked like a bundle of wool come bouncing out of the mist and over the crags until it slid to rest on the screes below where it lay very still. It was sometime before the stones of the scree adjusted themselves by stealthy crepitation and it became quite still once more. How typical of this appalling place, he thought, that the only evidence of life should be the death of a sheep!

He began hurriedly to extract a waterproof cape from his haversack and had hardly got it on before the storm broke in sudden and almost unbelievable fury. The rain lashed down, stinging his face as he blundered almost sightlessly down the track. So dark and lowering was the sky that at this rate, he reflected ruefully, it would very soon be pitch dark and he cursed himself as he realized that he had brought no torch. Not only had darkness fallen surprisingly early due to the sudden change in the weather, but he realized now that he had grossly underestimated the distance involved. He guessed that Llanvethney must still be at least six miles further down the valley.

The storm had now become a positive cloudburst which no protective clothing could possibly keep out. Cold rivulets found their way down his neck and even his stout boots were soon squelching. In this wet misery he began to doubt if he could

possibly succeed in reaching his destination that night. Had not Alan once mentioned a Youth Hostel somewhere between the head of the pass and the floor of the valley? If so it would make a good emergency port in the storm if only he could find it. Unfortunately he had no idea on which side of the track the Hostel lay; nor, as yet, could he see a single light in the fast gathering darkness.

At last, however, John sighted away to his left beneath the invisible mountain wall a single light shining out, and so wet and lost and wretched was he by this time that he instantly determined to make a beeline for it whether it was the Youth Hostel or not. Surely even the dourest of Welsh hill farmers would scarcely refuse him shelter on such a night. He could just distinguish a gate to the left of the track and through this he passed, plunging down a steep slope in the direction of that solitary light. As he did so he remembered too late that this was the side of the valley which had the stream at its foot and, sure enough, he soon heard above the steady roar of the rain the chuckling of a mountain torrent in sudden spate. Yet still the light lured him on so, somehow or other, he managed to slip and slide down the steep bank, to wade knee-deep through the boulder-strewn bed of the stream and to scramble on all fours up the muddy slope opposite. There were other unseen hazards to be surmounted such as old thorn hedges and sheep fences topped with strands of barbed wire before he finally found himself standing on a rough farm track, terraced along the slope, which obviously led in the direction of the light.

A few moments later John Hardy was knocking at the door of the farmhouse. The light streamed out from a curtained window to the left of the door, its fellow on the opposite side being in darkness. There was a sound from within of hob-nailed boots scuffing on flagstones followed by the rattle of door-bolts being withdrawn. The next instant he found himself confronting a very strange little figure indeed, his face thrown into high relief by the light of the paraffin lamp which he held before him, peering over it into the streaming darkness. He was so dark-skinned and dark-haired that he might have been a true Romany, yet so short in stature as to be almost a dwarf. He stared disconcertingly at John with unblinking eyes that

were black as sloes and seemed furtive and filled with suspicion. He spoke very rapidly in a sing-song, lilting tongue that John did not recognize. This struck him as very strange because, although he had no command of the Welsh language he had heard it spoken often enough. Also he had understood from Alan that Welsh was no longer spoken in this part of the border so that it struck him as odd that this strange little man, if he was indeed speaking some archaic form of Welsh, apparently knew no second language. However, plastered as he was in red mud and with water running out of his boots, John needed no words to express his plight and so, somewhat grudgingly, the little man stepped back and motioned him to enter. He did not lead the way into the lighted room from which he had obviously emerged, but opened a low dark doorway on the opposite side of the stone-flagged central passage and, signalling the other to follow him, led the way into a typical small Welsh farm parlour, setting the lamp down on the circular central table.

John would have greatly preferred the homely warmth of the farm kitchen which, as he fondly supposed, lay on the opposite side of the passage. Seen in the dim light of a single lamp, this typical Victorian parlour looked sombre and unwelcoming to a degree and, needless to say, there was no fire in the black and highly-polished grate. He also thought it curious that, in his dripping and muddy state, he should be shown straight into the 'best parlour'. There must, he concluded, be some very good reason why he was not to be allowed to share in whatever was going on across the passage. Nevertheless, he reflected philosophically, at least he had a roof over his head which was something on such a night. As soon as he had set down the lamp, his host had straightway left the room, closing the door firmly behind him as though he had other and more urgent business to attend to. Left alone, John removed his cape and his sodden boots and stockings, laying them down beside his haversack in the empty firegrate, before selecting the least uncomfortable looking of the Victorian chairs and settling down to make the best of such cold comfort. He could still hear the steady roar of the rain outside.

Chill and unwelcoming though the room was, particularly to such a damp and benighted traveller, John must have fallen

asleep from sheer fatigue, for he awoke with a start, subconsciously aware that some new sound had aroused him. Glancing down at his wristwatch he saw that it was just after midnight. He sat motionless, listening. The buffeting of the storm seemed to have ceased and in its place he thought he could hear a very unusual sound indeed which seemed to come from that lighted room across the passage. It resembled, he said, a kind of monotonous chant, although it was quite unlike any form of chant he had ever heard before. It seemed to have a primitive wildness about it although he could not have explained why he thought this, except that one voice was clearly distinguishable from the others by its curious timbre which he described as a cross between a rasping chuckle and the bleating of a large goat. Although under the circumstances it was a disquieting sound to hear, he was not particularly frightened. It was what happened next that caused the hairs on the back of his neck to stir.

First of all there was the sound of what John took to be the back door being flung violently open and then slammed to again with a thunderous crash. Instantly the murmur of voices ceased as though that mysterious company held their breath in fearful suspense. For a full minute the house was wrapped in a tense, expectant silence; then there came the sound of earth-shaking footfalls pacing down the flagged hallway. It was, John recalled, as though some ancient and gigantic stone statue had suddenly been endowed with terrible life and was stalking through the house. He remembers staring at the door of the room and praying that it would not open and that this monstrous thing would pass it by. Loud and startling as a trumpet blast a great voice suddenly cried out: 'Fear not me, fear what follows me.' Then John heard the front door open and slam shut with a violence that shook the house and all fell silent once more.

It was at this juncture that, with what strikes him now as an inexplicable act of courage or foolhardiness, John opened the casement window of his room and gazed out into the night, although it was pitch dark and he does not recall what precisely he expected to see or hear. Some shadow or sound of that huge presence which had just left the house? Or some presage of that greater fear to come which it had prophesied? At first

he could hear nothing except the steady, sullen drip of water from eave or downspout, but then his ears detected a curious sound in the air, seemingly coming from directly above the house. At first it was as if some great flock of migrant birds was wheeling overhead in the darkness, whistling and piping like so many lost souls. The sound gradually grew in volume, however, and as it did so it became loud with menace, an eldrich screaming very terrible to hear. Now it was as though there blew over—or out of—those sheer mountain walls that hemmed in the valley a great wind of such force that the very crevices of the crags and the stones of invisible screes became its vocal chords, screaming and yelling in a unison of violence. 'Fear what follows me', and now indeed, as he freely admits, John became terror-stricken. There was something so utterly monstrous about this sudden crescendo of tumult in the high air. It was like no storm he had ever known. It was as if the mountains themselves had transformed or perverted a natural element into some tremendous diabolical force.

John shut the window and as he stood rocking on his feet in the centre of the room he caught a glimpse of his white face in the mirror above the fireplace and scarcely recognized it as his own. He had closed the window not a moment too soon. Outside he heard the screaming reach an ultimate pitch of menace before merging into a great roaring sound as a mighty wind rushed down upon the house from the mountain. It struck with a force that made every door and window rattle; it was as though the house had been grasped and shaken by some gigantic hand. By this time John was on his knees upon the floor. The window blew in with a crash as the house was struck by a second and even more tremendous blow. Before he lost consciousness he remembered seeing the walls of the room suddenly bellying inwards and of the lamp sliding from the table with a crash, plunging all into a chaotic darkness.

John awoke to feel the sun hot upon his face. The recollection of the previous night filled his mind with a sudden panic and then the memory of that nightmare, if such it was, gradually receded. Yet still he hesitated to open his eyes. For if it was

indeed a nightmare, then surely he would still be sitting in that Victorian chair in the farm parlour and not lying in the sun. On the contrary, if it had indeed been no nightmare he would be lying, miraculously unhurt, amid the ruins of the farmhouse. At length, very warily, he opened his eyes and sat up. He found himself lying on a smooth and gentle slope of close-bitten turf, his haversack, his cape and his boots and stockings upon the grass beside him. A little distance away to his left was a shapeless mound of grey stones and beside this grew a clump of nettles and an ancient yew tree, sure signs of bygone human habitation, but of any recent ruin there was no sign whatever. The near-level slope where he sat formed the mouth of a steep cwm carved by a streamlet out of the mountain at his back so that it formed a sort of natural amphitheatre from which he could look down over the valley below. There, directly beneath him, ran the swift flowing stream which he had crossed with such difficulty the previous night and there, up the opposite slope, was surely the gateway by which he had left the track over the pass which he could see running diagonally along the opposite side of the valley. He shook his head in bewilderment as one who surfaces after a dive, not knowing where reality had ended and the dream had begun.

It was a perfect spring morning. The brilliant blue sky was flecked with innocent little cotton-wool cloudlets that drifted serenely along, the smaller ones dissolving as he watched them in the gathering heat of the sun. He saw their shadows moving along the slopes opposite and noticed that above the screes and the crags a more gentle slope extended upward towards the long, level skyline of the mountain ridge, a slope green with fresh bracken fronds and thickly populated with sheep and with mountain ponies, many with small foals at heel. These higher slopes, made invisible by low cloud the previous night, now transformed the appearance of the valley. He watched a pair of buzzards soaring effortlessly on motionless, moth-like wings upon an up-current of air above the crags opposite. Although the floor of the valley to his right was treeless, immediately to his left the stream disappeared in a little brake of alders and he could see that beyond this the valley became progressively richer and well-wooded. There were glimpses of

old farmsteads of pinkish grey stone or whitewash and of blue pencils of woodsmoke spiralling upwards from morning fires.

So striking was the contrast between the beauty of the scene now spread before him and his first impression of the valley when seen from the head of the pass the previous evening, that although John was no philosopher he could scarcely avoid speculating upon it. What had appeared under that darkening stormlight to be so malign now seemed to have become wholly beneficent and of a heart-lifting beauty that seemed almost paradisial. Were good and evil purely human concepts and did this little world that he surveyed include them both?

He put on his socks and boots, rolled up his cape and, shouldering his knapsack, set off down the valley. Within the first few yards he had struck a long disused track which had obviously led into the mouth of the cwm and must have been the one he had found on scrambling up the bank the night before. He judged correctly that if he followed it it would ultimately join the main track at a point lower down the valley. He had only just regained the latter and begun to stride out towards Llanvethney when he saw coming slowly towards him up the hill a Land Rover driven by a very worried looking Alan Brett. On seeing John coming towards him apparently none the worse, Alan's face relaxed into a broad grin, and 'Gosh, am I glad to see you!' he exclaimed as he drew up beside him, leaning over and opening the door on the passenger side. And as John threw his rucksack into the back and clambered in, 'Where did you tuck yourself away last night when that storm hit you?' he asked. 'I guessed you'd be at the Youth Hostel and it was when I called there just now and found you weren't there that I began to get really worried.' John made no immediate answer to his question and such reticence was so unusual that Alan looked keenly at him and judged correctly that he should forego any further cross-questioning, leaving the story to come out in his friend's own good time. So without further comment he reversed the Land Rover into a gateway and the two drove on in companionable silence down towards Llanvethney Priory.

The further they went the more beautiful the valley became, the more luxuriant the meadows and trees along its floor and the more majestic the sweep and curve of the mountains that

enclosed it. The loveliness all about him loosed John's tongue and he tried haltingly to explain to his friend the extraordinary contrast between the valley as he saw it now and his first impression of it as he entered it by the high pass the night before. In reply, Alan chuckled and 'An angel satyr walks these hills,' he quoted. 'Who wrote that?' asked the other sharply. 'A chap named Francis Kilvert,' explained Alan, 'who was curate of Clyro just the other side of the Wye in the 1870s and used to do a lot of walking in these mountains. It appears, rather enigmatically, in the diary that he kept which was published just before the last war.'

'I think I understand what he meant,' replied John after a short silence.

It was not until that evening when the two friends were comfortably ensconced in deep armchairs on either side of a blazing log fire in the big drawing room of the Priory Hotel that John told his friend the whole strange story. Throughout Alan listened with the utmost attention, never speaking a word until John had finished. Then, after a moment's silence, 'If I were to show you a large-scale map of the area, do you think you could pin-point the site of this mysterious farm where you stayed—or thought you stayed?' asked Alan. 'I am sure I could,' the other replied, whereupon his friend unfolded a map, two and a half inches to the mile, and spread it before them. It did not take John long before he had marked the spot with the point of a pencil. It was too easy; here was the line of the track descending from the pass, the stream running down almost parallel with it and, beyond it, the dense contour lines which marked the steep slope of the mountain. There was only one indentation in those contour lines and that must surely indicate the steep little cwm in which he had found himself that morning.

No sooner had he marked the place than Alan exclaimed in an awed voice, 'I thought as much, Ty yr Deol!' Then in answer to his friend's look of blank incomprehension he explained, 'Ty yr Deol, that means "the house of vengeance".' He got to his feet, opened the doors of a large glass-fronted bookcase, searched for a moment and then drew out a green-backed book. 'It's our friend Francis Kilvert again who tells us all about it in

his diary, volume one'—he riffled through the pages—'page 279—I quote:

"Near Capel y Ffin at the mouth of a dingle on the mountain side stood the house of Ty yr Deol (the house of vengeance). Some crime had been perpetrated on the spot and the place was accursed. When the workmen were building the house they heard a voice which seemed to fall from the air and come down the dingle, saying, 'Move the work across the green.' 'For why?' called back the astonished workmen. 'The spot is accursed,' said the voice solemnly. 'For how long?' shouted the workmen. 'Until the ninth generation,' returned the voice. Three attempts were made to build the house. Twice the house fell. The third time the house was built. One night in winter a young man came up the mountain to court his sweetheart who lived in the Ty yr Deol, the accursed, ill-fated house. His greyhound whined at the door, hung back and refused to enter the house, and no coaxing would induce him to come in. The young man took it as a warning and returned home. That night there was a landslip or snow slip, or a sudden mass of snow melted down the dingle driving the ice and water before it. The accursed house was overwhelmed and swept away and everyone in the house perished."

When Alan had read this the two friends sat for many minutes in silence, gazing into the flames of the fire, each busy with his own thoughts while outside dusk thickened in the valley and the room grew dark except for the flickering firelight.

Late

by

LES FREEMAN

As always, it is pleasant to introduce a new writer and 'Late' marks Les Freeman's debut in a ghost story anthology. He is no stranger to print, however, for he has a long journalistic background which includes work on 'The Northern Echo' and the 'Daily Express'. As well as features and news stories, he has written art and theatre reviews and currently writes on London theatre, specializing in dance, for provincial newspapers.

In his spare time, Les Freeman writes poetry and is a Fellow of the International Poetry Society. He has also written about a dozen plays, some of which have been staged, and has the unique distinction of winning the first prize in a national new play competition organized by a provincial theatre—and promptly having the prize-winning play banned by the competition's organizers!

'Late' is a very neat little ghost story and certainly makes a fitting introduction to the writer. It is based on a reportedly true haunting in Les Freeman's Teesside.

Ever since William Whitelaw, in his days as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, used a hotel in the wilds of Darlington as a base for a discussion on the Irish problem the town had been on the Government's short-list for small-scale but important conferences. Press and television reporters converged on the town each time it found itself at the centre of any national topic and it was to Darlington that Douglas Johnson, writer, freelance journalist and television commentator on anything connected with the arts, was travelling. The meeting he was to attend was one called to enable the Government to tell regional

arts associations to raise more money locally so that the Arts Council's budget could be pegged at fifty million pounds. The Prime Minister, his Minister for the Arts, and the chairman of the Arts Council were among the speakers due to preach to the converted.

Douglas Johnson was reporting and commenting on the meeting for a group of commercial radio stations and one of the quality Sunday newspapers. It was an all-expenses-paid trip that had the added benefit of a double fee. His plane took just under an hour to reach Teesside Airport from Heathrow and his taxi took just over thirty minutes to get him from the airport to his hotel in Darlington three or four miles away.

It was raining when he reached the hotel. He paid off the taxi and rushed into the reception area, brushing raindrops from his overcoat as he reached the desk. He announced himself to the receptionist who checked his reservation and then pushed the visitors' book towards him. As he filled in a potted version of his autobiography—name, address, nationality, visiting Darlington on business or pleasure (could anyone ever visit Darlington for pleasure? thought Doug Johnson) the receptionist filled in a card, handed it to him and told him he was in room 74.

'74?' replied Doug Johnson, turning the statement into a question. 'The last time I was here was fifteen or twenty years ago, and I was in room 75 then. I don't suppose there's a chance of me having that room for old times' sake?'

'It must have been twenty years ago,' said the receptionist, re-assessing her idea of Doug Johnson's age. She handed the key to a porter: 'Room 74.'

'No chance of room 75, then?'

'I'm afraid not,' smiled the receptionist cheerfully.

'Taken already?'

She shook her head: 'No, that room was taken out of service about twenty years ago.' She waited for him to say something else, but when he didn't she added reassuringly: 'But 74 is fine.'

The porter didn't speak in the lift; and he restricted himself to the minimum of conversation as he directed Johnson along the corridor on the second floor to room 74. He opened the door, stepped back dutifully to allow the guest to enter first,

then followed, putting the suitcase on to a stand by the door.

'Will there be anything else, sir?' asked the porter stepping towards the door.

'Just one small thing,' said Doug, sinking his hand into his back pocket and crinkling the paper the money secured there. 'What is wrong with room 75? Why is it closed?'

'I don't really know, sir. I've only been here a few years and the room has been closed all that time. It is used sometimes—as a storeroom—but most of the time it is just locked up.'

Doug stared at the porter blankly.

'That all, sir?'

'Er, yes. Thanks,' said Doug handing over a pound note. 'Buy yourself a couple of drinks on me.'

The porter mumbled his thanks and closed the door. Doug unpacked; then he bathed and tried not to think about room 75. He was, after all, in Darlington to discover what was going to happen about public support for the arts. The simple mystery of a locked hotel bedroom shouldn't interest him. But it did.

After a bath he made for the bar and a whisky and water. It was just opening time and the cocktail bar was empty. Doug ordered his drink and ran his eyes over the assortment of bottles staring at him from the safety of the shelves.

'Here on business?' asked the barman, arranging potato crisps in plastic containers. He stopped for a moment to brush salt from his dull blue uniform.

'Of sorts,' said Doug. 'But not for long.'

A young man in a dark suit, loud tie, and long hair ordered pernod and water, sat on a high stool and buried himself in the evening paper.

'Tell me,' said Doug when the barman returned to his potato crisp arrangements, 'I'm in room 74 and was interested in staying in room 75. But ...'

'... you couldn't,' said the barman. 'No one has stayed in room 75 for years.'

'Twenty years?'

'Could well be,' said the barman, forgetting about the potato crisps. 'I've been here for, let me see, fifteen years in June and I've never known that room be open.'

'To guests,' said Doug. 'It is used as a storeroom now.'

'So they say,' murmured the barman. 'But I've never seen it open.'

'Why?'

'I have no idea,' said the barman trying to sound diplomatic. 'My work's behind this bar. I can't tell you the reasons why the management chooses to close one of its rooms.'

'But I can,' announced the pernod-drinker with a grin and he turned to face Doug, letting the newspaper fall to the bar. 'In the 1950s there was a series of complaints from people who stayed in that room. They all complained about the same things: feeling cold, or feeling as though there was someone else there watching them. After a night in room 75 they either moved into a different bedroom or checked out of the hotel. That had been going on for months without anyone outside the hotel knowing anything about it.'

He looked at his empty glass. Doug took the hint and ordered himself another whisky at the same time.

'... and then it became common knowledge when one of the maids went into the room one morning and found the guest flat out on the floor—dead, quite dead. The maid fainted and when she came round insisted that someone had been standing in the room when she walked in. But no one could ever explain who he could have been. The whole thing could have been dismissed as a one-paragraph—'guest found dead'—story but for the fact that the maid talked to the Press and it was her who claimed for the first time that the room was haunted. She talked about all the people who had stayed in the room for one night and then had refused to sleep there a second night; and she insisted that the guy standing in the room before she passed out was the ghost. The maid left the hotel, and the hotel announced that the room was to be closed—temporarily. It has been closed ever since. Room 75 is always out of service.'

'Any reason for your detailed knowledge of the subject?' asked Doug.

'Only that I'm on the local paper—and we are for ever doing anniversary pieces on the uninvited ghost in room 75.'

'And the management,' said the barman, 'doesn't like that at all.'

Doug smiled: 'Look, this interests me.' And he introduced

himself and explained what he was doing in Darlington, adding: 'But the last time I was here I was working for a magazine, all of twenty years ago, and I was ghost hunting. And I was staying in room 75.'

The reporter, who introduced himself as Eric Hobbs, looked interested: 'Do you make a habit of it? Did you find the last one?'

'No, I don't, and no, I didn't. And the last time I was looking I was even stopped from looking in the right place in the end. And that wasn't room 75. But while I was staying there there was certainly nothing remotely spooky about it.'

Hobbs paid for more drinks.

'My ghost,' said Doug, 'was a Canadian fighter pilot who had been stationed near here—at RAF Middleton St George—during the war. One night he went out on a mission and on the way back he was shot up by a German plane. He got back to Darlington but something was radically wrong with his aircraft ...'

'... yes, I know this one as well,' smiled Hobbs. 'So he radioed that he had the option of either bailing out and risking the chance of his plane crashing on one of the town's housing estates or crashing in the North Sea and killing himself. So he killed himself.'

'That's right,' said Doug, 'and his ghost was supposed to walk from the ops room to the spot outside the hangar where his plane last stood. And for some reason—someone told me afterwards it was because he had seen the face of the German who got his plane—if anyone saw the face of the ghost they also saw death; and died. Nice story.'

'And what happened to you?'

'Well,' sighed Doug, remembering the story for the first time for about fifteen years and also realizing he was twenty years older. 'We had everything fixed up for me to do interviews with some RAF men who said they'd seen the ghost, and then I was to spend a night on the airfield to see if I could see him for myself. The interviews went OK, and we got plenty of pictures. But a couple of hours before I was supposed to start my ghost-spotting routine there was a message from London calling the whole thing off. The Ministry of Defence had had

second thoughts and they didn't want to have any reporters on the airfield at night. So I came back here, to this hotel, and spent a couple of days in room 75 on the telephone to London telling anyone at the Ministry who would bother to listen to me that my magazine had spent a lot of money to get me near the ghost, so please could I try to see him. Then I gave up. I wrote the story based on the interviews, threw in a piece about the Ministry trying to stop the Press seeing their pet ghost and that was that. I must say that until I walked into this hotel today I had forgotten all about him. I suppose that Teesside Airport, where I landed, is the old RAF station?'

'That's right.'

'And does our Canadian still walk the runways there, then?'

'I don't think so,' said Eric Hobbs, 'or at least there have been no stories of anyone spotting him there recently.'

'Perhaps we could go and look for him tonight,' suggested Doug. 'There certainly couldn't be any trouble with the Ministry of Defence now, could there? I'm not sure that we have a Ministry of Defence any more.'

Hobbs stared into space for a moment or two as he worked out whether a night at the airport was really going to be worth a story in the following morning's editions. 'If we do go up there,' he finally said, 'I take it you wouldn't mind if I did a few hundred words on it all for tomorrow's paper. I mean it's not every day you find someone hunting a ghost he missed twenty years ago.'

Doug said he had no objection to the idea of a news story and the reporter disappeared to warn his news editor of the possibility of an unexpected story. Doug had fresh drinks waiting when Hobbs returned and as they drank Doug suggested they should eat before heading for the airport. Over rare steaks they discussed the finer points of their prey. Doug signed for the meal—adding a further fifteen pounds to his bill for two nights—and the two men left the dining room for the street, checking their watches as they reached the pavement. It was eight thirty, and Eric Hobbs said that if he hadn't got a story over by eleven p.m. it would have to wait a day. Standing at the kerb, Doug looked up at the hotel and said it didn't look the sort of place to be haunted: 'It's too new. Too commercial.'

'That is what everybody says,' said Hobbs. 'We've been through all the records for the site and can't find any reason for having a ghost there: murders didn't happen there; nothing. The odd thing is that so many people really did complain about the room. They "felt" something there—you know, they just knew there was something there, but they couldn't say what it was—and we are forever getting people telling us about the face at the window of room 75. It's almost become a joke ...'

'To everyone except the hotel management, I suppose,' chuckled Doug. 'In the country a nice ghost could be an attraction—especially if it could be persuaded to appear in the bar. But in Darlington ...' They laughed together as they climbed into Eric Hobbs' car and started their journey to the airport.

Teesside Airport is used mainly for internal flights, so there was little difficulty in gaining access first to the airport buildings and then to the adjacent grounds. 'I was told by my first chief reporter that I just had to look as though I had a right to be where I was and no one would question my authority,' said Hobbs. 'So I always put on an uppity air and hope for the best.' They wandered around the area looking for anything that looked familiar to Doug. Immediately near the airport buildings the grounds were well maintained, but further afield, and away from the runways, nature was more in command. There was little light and the noise from the airport complex degenerated into a low hum. There were occasional explosions of sound as aircraft took off and droned overhead. In one direction old sleeping accommodation had been converted into a teacher training college and the lights from the windows looked warm and inviting. In the distance a diesel railway train snaked its way to the smoke of Teesside. On the way to the college the two journalists reached a dirty, brick-built hut with a metal-framed window facing the runways. It had an almost derelict door which Doug pushed open. The hut was practically empty but seemed to be used as a storehouse: there were spades and brushes, a couple of packing cases and a rusting filing cabinet heaped in one corner.

Doug looked out of the window, across the airfield, and then spoke very slowly: 'I think this is the actual place. The story

goes that the airman used to pass this building and he became visible when he walked through the shaft of light thrown out by the window. He was first spotted when a duty-officer or someone saw him pass the window, called to him and when he didn't come back here the officer ran out after him. The airman turned round and then disappeared into thin air and the officer fainted. I think they got him to hospital with concussion or something ... it's a long time ago and my memory's not that good ... but he died the next day. You see, he'd looked at the airman's face.'

'Not nice,' said Hobbs. 'Not nice at all.'

'Nobody seemed to like that bit of the story very much,' conceded Doug, 'and I can remember when all the plans were being made for me to stay the night here I was feeling rather jittery at the thought of going the same way. I really wanted to see that thing, but I was scared of the thought of seeing it. I'd been on the airfield several times over two or three days and everyone I spoke to said I was a fool to try to make an appointment with a ghost—but I was trying to sound very brave and I defied the ghost to dare to appear to me. Then the Ministry finally stamped on the whole idea and I was quietly pleased not to keep the date. I had to go through the routine of fighting the decision but I was still more than a little thankful that it was all over. That was a long time ago now; I think I would be willing to risk facing him now if he had the courage to turn up tonight—but he obviously hasn't.'

'I'm not trying to fool anyone,' said Hobbs. 'I wouldn't want to face him. I am a conscientious coward.'

They laughed together and took in the scene. It was desolate and dark.

'Even if there wasn't a ghost story connected with this place,' said Hobbs, 'I'm sure someone would invent one.' He was writing an imaginary news story in his mind about ghosts that had never existed.

'I think I would be quite happy just to see one standard minor ghost of an airman without bothering to invent any more,' said Doug. 'But judging from the way he is insisting on staying out of sight he doesn't feel like seeing me ... even though I did make an appointment twenty years ago.' He laughed aloud.

'But perhaps we shouldn't joke about it.' And he laughed again.

The two of them walked slowly up and down the area where the mystery airman was supposed to appear and noticed nothing. They checked their watches several times; at eleven o'clock Eric Hobbs decided to skip the idea of a news story; at eleven thirty Doug suggested they should call it a day; and at the bewitching hour of midnight Eric Hobbs agreed they should go. Then they returned, a little dejected, to the hotel. The reporter refused the offer of a drink, said he would probably see Doug the following night, and left Doug to enter the hotel lounge alone. It was empty, he rang for service and ordered a large whisky from the waiter who answered his call.

Doug sat down with a copy of the local weekly newspaper, *The Darlington and Stockton Times*, and read reports of rural engagements, parish council meetings, hunt balls, fatstock prices, weddings, jumble sales, and obituaries; and he drank two more large whiskies.

It was very late; he was very tired; and bed seemed very inviting. He had collected his key when he returned from the airport, so he went straight to his room, stripped—leaving his clothes in a crumpled heap on a chair—climbed into bed and switched off the bedside lamp. Sleep seemed only moments away. He closed his eyes and yawned. For what seemed like an hour he lay on his back, his eyes closed, begging for sleep. He sat up in bed and leaned over to switch on the bedside lamp so that he could see the time, but the lamp would not work. He pressed the switch several times but the lamp would not light. He sighed deeply, lay back on the bed and closed his eyes again. As he concentrated on sleep he suddenly became aware of how silent the room was; he opened his eyes and was surprised by the room's darkness. No light from anywhere; no noise from anywhere: it was like being in a blacked-out bedroom in some isolated rural country cottage except that in such a cottage there would at least have been the sound of trees or wind; in room 74 there was nothing. Nothing. Then suddenly he could hear something: himself breathing. The sound grew louder and the harder he concentrated on the sound of his breath the louder the breathing became: like a crowd of well-built men breathing

in unison and filling the Albert Hall with life. He was suddenly cold; there was water forming in his eyes; his throat was dry; his nose was blocked.

The sound of breathing stopped as suddenly as it had started. He fingered his body to assure himself he was still breathing. He was; but he could not hear his breathing. Instead there was his heartbeat. A great methodical thumping of drums rolling round and round the bedroom. He was feeling colder: icy, chilling, freezing. He pulled the sheets around his shoulders and realized he was afraid. He tried to look round the room, but his eyes refused to grow accustomed to the lack of light; the darkness remained surrounding him, almost suffocating him in its thickness.

He felt his body growing numb; felt people staring at him from all corners of the room; heard sounds he could not understand (a low communal whispering of medieval witches that degenerated into hissing); experienced sensations he could not explain (his hair, not his head, was hurting: there were thousands of pinpricks of pain starting in the roots of his hair and extending the length of each individual hair. He ran his fingers through his hair to get rid of the ludicrous sensation and found his hands burning with pain). He bit his fingers and then let his head, full of its bewildering happenings, fall into his hands. He was about to start praying when he realized that his fingers were wet and he gasped when he realized he did not know whether they were wet with sweat from his face or blood from his head. He stared out at nothing and saw a vast expanse of waving grass at high summer; caught the heavy pollen perfume of meadows; heard the moan of the wind billowing in from the sea. The room was full to bursting point; full of people urging him to go; full of happenings forcing him aside; full of things he wanted to get away from; he had to get out. He stumbled from the bed, heading towards the light switch by the door. His breath was leaving his body in short uncontrollable gasps and he could feel his head and his hands twitching together but lacking coordination. He touched the door accidentally and it opened inwards, allowing a shaft of light from the corridor to burst into the room. Doug pressed the light switch and light was everywhere. He leaned against the

door to close it, and then slumped on to the bed, forcing himself to smile at the experience he had created for himself by mixing myths and whisky. If only that reporter could see him now. Doug decided that black coffee was a necessity at that moment. He telephoned reception to discover if coffee was a possibility and, when he heard it was, said he would drink it in the lounge. He took a long floor-length dressing gown of crimson silk from the wardrobe, put the brilliant dressing gown on and pushed his feet into black silk slippers. Looking like an old mandarin he looked closely round the room before he left. He did not switch the light off.

The coffee was waiting for him in the lounge. He took a long time drinking it, draining a final cup from the stainless steel pot forty-five minutes after he had started to drink the first. The black, sugarless coffee and the cheerfulness of the lounge lessened his reluctance to return to his room. The night porter asked if all was well and Doug insisted that it was. Doug checked that his key was safely in his pocket and then left the lounge after a final 'goodnight' to the porter. He climbed the stairs rather than take the lift and he walked slowly down the corridor with his eyes half closed, studying the pattern of the Axminster carpet, before stopping and putting his key in a lock. The room was in darkness and he switched on the bedside lamp. The bed had been straightened and his clothes tidied away. He cursed five star hotels for their super efficiency and was about to take off his dressing gown when he spotted someone else in the room: standing near the window, looking out across the town to the airport. Doug tightened his robe around him. The man at the window made no effort to turn round; he was wearing a dull blue uniform and he seemed fairly young. He mumbled something about being kept waiting and that Doug was late. Doug shrugged and leaned against the wall as he told the man he needn't have bothered to straighten the bed or tidy the room. 'And I want to go to bed now,' said Doug, 'so you can go. I've ordered my morning tea; you can go.' Doug felt uneasy, as though he was on the verge of losing his temper. The man turned, and the light from the bedside lamp caught his features.

* * *

The maid who delivered Doug's early morning tea reported that his clothes were in his room, but he wasn't. At lunchtime the management thought it would be wise to inform the police of the fact that one of the guests had disappeared; and in the middle of the afternoon, after the rest of the hotel had been searched, the manager turned the key in the lock of room 75, insisting there was no possibility of a guest finding his way into the rarely used storeroom.

Doug Johnson, writer, freelance journalist and television commentator on anything connected with the arts, was found on the floor of room 75, wedged between dusty packing cases and a rusting filing cabinet.

In a six paragraph obituary the following morning Eric Hobbs suggested that a twenty-year-old appointment had finally been kept. Doug Johnson had seen the face of his mystery airman who was then free to return to his airfield or to rest. But the door to room 75 remained locked.

The Crab Spider

by

ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN

Few stories have ever given me as much pleasure (both to read and to bring back to print) as 'The Crab Spider', for it has taken a good few years to track down.

Emile Erckmann (1822-1899) and Alexandre Chatrian (1826-1890) were two Alsatian writers who have been almost forgotten. They wrote together for over thirty years, from the 1840s right up until 1889, when a lawsuit over alleged slander broke up their partnership and indeed their long friendship.

Of the many books on which they collaborated, ranging from military history to ghost stories, none have survived in print until the present day and only a few were ever translated into English. Readers interested in seeing more of their stories might like to consult my other anthologies, Victorian Tales of Terror *and* Terror by Gaslight, *which both contain Erckmann-Chatrian material.*

Their main claim to fame in this country was their play The Polish Jew, *known in English as* The Bells, *under which title it gave Sir Henry Irving his weirdest and most powerful part. Several of their tales of terror were published here in translation, including 'The Man Wolf' (1876) and 'The Wild Huntsman' (1877) but strangely never this story.*

I say strangely, for it was held in high esteem by no less authorities than M. R. James (who thought it 'admirable') and H. P. Lovecraft (who described it as 'full of engulfing darkness and mystery'). While James probably read it in the original French, Lovecraft was more fortunate for an English translation was published in America at the turn of the century. However, its only previous appearance here was in French as part of a modest volume entitled Contes Fantastiques *(1901).*

It is this edition that I have selected and this new translation, by Eithne Fearnley-Whittingstall, is the first appearance of the story in English here that I can trace since it was written over a hundred and thirty years ago, I think you will agree with me that it was definitely worth waiting for.

The hot springs at Spinbronn, situated in Hundsrück some leagues from Pirmesens, at one time enjoyed a magnificent reputation. All those who suffered from gout or kidney troubles in Germany used to congregate there. The wild aspect of the country did not deter them. They stayed in pretty cottages at the bottom of the pass and bathed in the waterfall, which fell in thick sheets of foam from a cave at the top of a cliff. They drank a decanter of mineral water or two a day, and the resident doctor, Daniel Hâselnoss, who gave out his prescriptions wearing a large wig and a chestnut-coloured suit, did excellent business.

Today the waters at Spinbronn feature no longer in the 'Codex'; in this poor village, you can see only wretched woodcutters and, sad to relate, Dr Hâselnoss has long gone! All of which is the result of a series of very strange occurrences which Councillor Hans Bremer of Pirmesens related to me one summer evening.

'You of course know, Maître Frantz,' he said to me, 'that the spring at Spinbronn comes out of a sort of cave, approximately fifteen feet high and twelve to fifteen feet wide; the water has a temperature of 67° C and is briny. As for the cave, it is entirely covered on the outside with moss, ivy and brushwood and no one knows its depth, since hot vapours prevent anyone from entering.

'However, a peculiar thing had been remarked since the last century, that some of the birds of the neighbourhood, thrushes, turtle-doves and hawks, were often seen to fly in but never to come out. No one knew to what mysterious influence they should attribute this peculiarity.

'In 1801, during the watering season, perhaps owing to the

unusually heavy rain that year, the spring became more abundant, and one day the bathers who were walking at the bottom on the lawn saw a human body, dead white, falling from the waterfall.

'You may judge for yourself, Maître Frantz, the general panic. Naturally it was thought that in years gone by a murder had been committed at Spinbronn, and that the body of the victim had been thrown into the spring. But the body weighed no more than twelve pounds, and Dr Hâselnoss deduced from this that it must have lain in the sands for more than three centuries, to have been reduced to this state of desiccation.

'This line of reasoning, though very plausible, did not prevent a crowd of bathers, who were naturally upset at having drunk from the salty water, from leaving at the end of that day. Those who were genuine sufferers with gout and their kidneys consoled themselves ... but more breaking up inside the cavern occurred for all the debris, mud and rubbish which was in the cave was disgorged over the ensuing days; a real charnel house came down from the mountain, skeletons of animals of every sort—quadrupeds, birds, reptiles—in short all the worst horrors imaginable.

'Hâselnoss immediately published a pamphlet pointing out that all these bones came from an antediluvian world, that they were fossil bones which had accumulated there in a sort of hollow during the deluge that is four thousand years before Christ, that as a consequence they could be considered genuine stones, that people should not be disgusted by them ... But his work had scarcely reassured the gout sufferers, when, one fine morning, the corpse of a fox, then that of a hawk with all its feathers, fell from the waterfall.

'It was impossible to maintain any longer that these remains were previous to the flood. Consequently the feeling of disgust was so great that everyone hastened to pack his belongings and go off to take the waters elsewhere.

'"What a disgrace!" exclaimed the beautiful ladies ... "What a horror!" "That's where the virtue of these mineral waters comes from ... We would rather die from kidney stones than continue such treatment!"

'After eight days only a huge Englishman remained at Spin-

bronn, who had at the same time gout in both hands and the feet and who was known as Sir Thomas Haverburch, Commodore. He lived in great style, as was the custom of British people in a foreign country.

'This character, big and fat, with a florid complexion, but whose hands were literally knotted with gout, would have swallowed broth made with dead bodies if he thought it would cure his infirmity. He laughed a great deal at the departure of the other invalids and took up residence in the prettiest cottage, half-way up the hill, declaring his intention of spending the winter at Spinbronn.'

At this point Councillor Bremer slowly inhaled a generous pinch of snuff, as if to rekindle his memories; he shook the delicate lace of his shirt frill with the tips of his fingers and continued.

'Five or six years before the revolution of 1789, a young doctor from Pirmesens, called Christian Weber, had set off for San Domingo in the hope of there making his fortune. He had effectively amassed some one hundred thousand pounds in the exercise of his profession, when the revolt of the negroes broke out.

'There is no need for me to remind you of the barbaric treatment which our unfortunate compatriots suffered in Haiti. Dr Weber had the good fortune to escape the massacre and to save a part of his fortune. He then travelled to South America, and spent several years in French Guiana. In 1801 he returned to Pirmesens and established himself at Spinbronn, where Dr Hâselnoss handed over his house and his dead practice.

'Christian Weber brought with him an old negress called Agatha—an awesome creature, with a short squat nose, lips as big as your fist, her head covered in a triple row of scarves in garish colours. This poor old woman loved red; she had hooped earrings which dangled as far as her shoulders, and the mountain people of Hundsrück would come from twenty miles around to stare at her.

'As for Dr Weber, he was a tall, gaunt man, invariably dressed in a sky-blue coat with swallow-tails and in buckskin breeches. He wore a pliable straw hat and boots with bright yellow tops, on the front of which dangled two silver tassels.

'He wasn't very talkative; his laugh had something of a nervous twitching in it, and his grey eyes, usually calm and meditative, shone with an unnatural glow at the slightest sign of contradiction. Each morning he would go for a walk on the mountain, letting his horse roam and whistling, always in the same monotone, the same melody from a negro song. This eccentric had brought back from his travels a number of boxes full of weird insects, some of them bronzy-black and as big as eggs, others small and scintillating like sparks. He seemed to be much more fond of these than of his patients and from time to time, on his way back from his strolls, he brought back some butterflies pinned to the band of his hat.

'He had hardly settled into Hâselnoss's huge house than he filled its farmyard with foreign birds, Barbary geese with scarlet cheeks, guinea-fowl and a white peacock which usually perched on the garden wall and which shared with the negress the admiration of the mountain folk.

'If I am going into details, Maître Frantz, it's because they remind me of my early youth. Dr Weber turned out to be at the same time both my cousin and my tutor, and on his return to Germany, he had come to get me and install me in his home at Spinbronn. Black Agatha at first inspired in me some fear, and it was only with some difficulty that I could get used to her unusual features. She was a good woman, she could make spicy dishes well, she hummed strange songs in a guttural voice at the same time snapping her fingers and rhythmically raising her fat legs in turn, so that I ended up liking her very much.

'Dr Weber had, quite naturally, made friends with Sir Thomas Haverburch, who was in his eyes his most prominent patient, and I wasn't long in realizing that these two eccentrics had long sessions together. They chatted about various mysteries, like the transmission of energy, and they indulged in certain bizarre gestures which they had both observed in the course of their travels, Sir Thomas in the East and my tutor in the Americas. I found it very intriguing.

'As happens with children, I was always on the look-out for what they seemed to want to hide from me. But despairing in the end of discovering anything I resolved to ask Agatha. The

poor old woman, after making me promise to say nothing about it, confessed to me that my tutor was a sorcerer. Moreover, Dr Weber exercised a peculiar influence over the negress's mind and this lady, normally so cheerful and always ready to amuse herself at the slightest thing, trembled like a leaf, when, by chance, her master's grey eyes fell on her.

'All this, Maître Frantz, seems to have no connection with the springs of Spinbronn ... But, wait, just wait ... You will see by what a strange string of circumstances my story is related to this.

'I told you that birds would go into the cave and not come out, and even other bigger animals. After the final departure of the bathers, some inhabitants of the village remembered that a young girl, called Loïsa Müller, who lived with her old invalid grandmother in a cottage on the slope of the hill, had suddenly disappeared about five years ago. She had set off one morning to look for grass in the forest, and since then no one had ever heard of her again, except that a few days later, some woodcutters who were coming down from the mountain had found her apron and her sickle a few paces from the cave.

'Since then it was obvious to everyone that the body that had fallen from the waterfall, and about which Hâselnoss had said such very nice things, was none other than that of Loïsa Müller. The poor young girl had undoubtedly been drawn into the cavern by the mysterious influence to which even weaker things were subjected almost daily.

'This influence, what was it? No one knew. But the inhabitants of Spinbronn, superstitious like all mountain folk, claimed that the devil lived in the cave, and the terror spread in the surrounding districts.

'Now, one July afternoon in 1802, my cousin was working on a new classification of the insects in his boxes. He had taken several quite curious ones from them the evening before. I was beside him, holding a lighted candle in my hand and in the other a needle that I heated.

'Sir Thomas, sitting down, his chair leaning against the edge of a window and his feet on a stool, watched us working and smoked a cigar.

'I was on very good terms with Sir Thomas Haverburch, and

I used to accompany him every day to the woods in his barouche. He enjoyed listening to me chattering in English and wanted to make of me, he would say, a real gentleman.

'When he had labelled all his butterflies, Dr Weber at last opened the box of his biggest insects and said: "Yesterday I caught a magnificent stag-beetle, the great *Lucanus Cervus* of the oaks of Hartz. It has this peculiarity that its right claw forks into five branches. It's a rare species."

'At the same time I gave him the needle, and as he pierced the insect before fixing it on to the cork strip, Sir Thomas, who up to then was impassive, got up, and drawing near a box, began to consider the crab spider from Guiana that it contained with a feeling of horror that strikingly portrayed itself on his fat red face.

'"There," he exclaimed, "is the most hideous work of creation! I only have to see it and I feel myself shaking all over." In fact a sudden pallor spread all over his face.

'"Bah!" said my tutor, "all that's just a childish phobia. You heard your nurse cry out when she saw a spider, you were afraid and you have retained the impression. But if you looked at the spider through a powerful microscope, you would be amazed at the perfection of its organs, at their admirable arrangement, and at their very elegance."

'"It disgusts me," cut in the Commodore abruptly. "Ugh!" He turned on his heel.

'"Oh! I don't know why," he said, "the spider has always made my blood run cold."

'Dr Weber started to laugh, and I, who shared Sir Thomas's feelings, exclaimed: '"Yes, cousin, you should take this nasty creature out of the box. It is disgusting. It mars all the others."

'"You little animal," he said to me, his eyes sparkling, "who is forcing you to look at it? If it doesn't please you, off you go elsewhere!"

'Evidently he was angry. Sir Thomas, who was then in front of the window looking at the mountain, turned round suddenly, came and took me by the hand, and said to me in a kindly way: "Your tutor, Hans, loves his spider. We prefer the trees and the grass. Let's go for a walk."

'"Yes! Go!" shouted the doctor, "and return for supper at

six." Then raising his voice, "No hard feelings, Sir Haverburch!"

'Sir Thomas wanted to drive himself and dismissed his servant. He made me sit beside him on the same seat and we set off for the Rothalps.

'While the carriage slowly climbed the sandy path, a sadness that I could not control took hold of my soul. Sir Thomas, for his part, was serious. He was aware of my sadness and said to me: "You don't like spiders, Hans, no more do I. But, thank Heaven, there are no dangerous ones in this country. The crab spider which your tutor has in his box comes from French Guiana. It lives for years, in the huge swampy forests constantly filled with humid vapours and burning gases; it needs this temperature to live. Its web, or to be more precise, its huge net, envelops an entire thicket. It captures birds in it, just like our spiders catch flies. I have seen others in the collections of those people who study such things but it could not live long in this cold climate. All those that ever escaped no doubt perished very quickly. But chase from your mind these revolting images and have a pull at my old Burgundy!"

'Then, turning round, he lifted up the lid of the second seat and took out of the straw a sort of a gourd, from which he filled to the brim a leather cup and handed it to me.

'The carriage, harnessed to a small horse from the Ardennes, thin and nervous as a goat, climbed up the precipitous path. Myriads of insects buzzed in the heather. On the right, a hundred paces at the most, stretched above us the dark edge of the forests of Rothalps, whose sinister depths, full of brambles and rank weeds, revealed now and then some clearings, flooded with light. On our left, tumbled the stream of Spinbronn. The higher we climbed the more the silvery sheets of water floating in the abyss took on an azure hue, and redoubled their thundering roar.

'I was enthralled by the spectacle. Sir Thomas, leaning back on his seat, his knees up to his chin, gave way to his customary dreaming, while the horse, straining with its legs and leaning its head on the harness, so as to balance the carriage, suspended us as it were from the edge of the rock. Soon, however, we reached a shallower slope, surrounded with shadows. I had

still got my head turned and my eyes lost in the boundless view. At the sight of the shadows I turned around and saw, within a hundred paces, the cave of Spinbronn. The surrounding underwood was magnificently green, and the spring, which before falling from the plateau stretched over a bed of sand and black pebbles, was so limpid that one would have thought it frozen over, had not light wisps of steam covered its surface.

'The horse had just stopped of its own accord to breathe. Sir Thomas, standing up, gazed for a few seconds at the scenery.

' "How calm everything is," he said; then after a moment's silence, "If you weren't here, Hans, I would willingly take a bathe in the pool."

' "But, Commodore," I said to him, "why not go for a bathe? I can very easily go for a short stroll roundabouts. There is on the mountain nearby a huge pasture all covered with strawberries. I shall go and pick some of them. I shall be back in an hour.'

' "I'd really like to, Hans, it's a good idea. Dr Weber claims that I drink too much burgundy. You have to fight wine with mineral water. This sandy bed pleases me."

'Then both of us having climbed down, he tied the horse to the trunk of a small birch tree and shook my hand as if to say to me, "You can go."

'I saw him sit down on the moss and take off his boots. As I moved away he turned round and shouted: "In an hour, Hans!" These were his last words.

'An hour later I returned to the spring. The horse, the carriage and Sir Thomas's clothes were the only things to be seen. The sun was setting. The shadows lengthened. There was no bird song under the foliage, not an insect buzzed in the tall grasses; a deathly silence hovered over the solitude.

'This silence terrified me. I climbed on to the rock which towers over the cave. I looked right and left. No one! I called out. No reply! The sound of my voice, repeated by the echoes, made me afraid. Night was coming down slowly. An indescribable anguish oppressed me. Suddenly the story of the young girl who had disappeared came to my mind; and I started to

run down. But, having arrived in front of the cave, I stopped, overcome by an inexpressible terror. Glancing into the black shadow of the spring, I could see two motionless red blobs ... then huge lines splashing about in a peculiar way in the midst of the darkness, and this at a depth where perhaps no human eyes had yet penetrated. Fear gave to my sight, to all my senses a subtlety of perception unheard of. For some seconds I heard, quite clearly, a cicada singing its evening lament on the edge of the wood. Then my heart, for a moment stilled by emotion, started to beat furiously and I heard nothing else!

'Then, uttering a terrified cry, I ran off, leaving behind the horse, the carriage. In less than twenty minutes, leaping over rocks, brushwood, I had reached the threshold of our house, burst through the front door and shouted in a choked voice: "Run! Run! Sir Haverburch is dead! Sir Haverburch is in the cave!"

'After these words, uttered in the presence of my tutor, old Agatha and two or three people invited that evening by the doctor, I fainted. I have learned since that I was delirious for an hour.

'The entire village went off to look for the Commodore. Christian Weber had dragged them off. At ten o'clock in the evening, the entire crowd came back, bringing with them the coach and, in the coach, Sir Haverburch's clothes. They had discovered nothing. It was impossible to go ten steps into the cave without being suffocated by the hot vapours from the spring.

'During their absence Agatha and I had remained seated in the corner of the chimney. I, muttering in terror incoherent words, she, her hands crossed on her knees, her eyes wide open, going from time to time to the window to see what was going on, because one could see from the foot of the mountain torches running through the woods. One could hear voices, far away, hailing one another in the night.

'When her master approached, Agatha started to tremble. The doctor came in suddenly, pale, his lips tight, despair imprinted on his face. About twenty woodcutters followed him in confusion, with their large wide-rimmed felt hats, their weather-beaten faces, waving the remnants of their torches. Hardly were they in the room than the sparkling eyes of my

tutor seemed to look for something. He saw the negress, and without a single word being exchanged between them, the poor woman started to cry out.

'"No! No! I don't want to!"

'"And I want to!" replied the doctor harshly.

'You might have said that the negress had been seized by an invincible power. She shuddered from head to toe and, Christian Weber pointing out a seat for her, she sat on it with a corpse-like rigidity.

'All those present, witnesses of this frightening spectacle, good-living people of coarse primitive manners, but full of pious sentiments, crossed themselves, and I, who didn't know then, even by name, the terrible magnetic power of the will, I started to tremble, thinking that Agatha was dead.

'Christian Weber had gone up to the negress and passed his hand over her brow in a rapid movement.

'"Are you there?" he said.

'"Yes, master."

'"Sir Thomas Haverburch?"

'At these words she had a renewed trembling fit.

'"Can you see him?"

'"Yes! Yes!" she said in a choking voice. "I see him."

'"Where is he?"

'"Up there! At the bottom of the cave! Dead!"

'"Dead!" said the doctor. "How?"

'"The spider! Oh, the dreadful crab spider! Oh!"

'"Calm yourself," said the doctor, quite pale. "Tell us clearly."

'"The crab spider has him by the throat ... he is there ... at the bottom ... under the rock ... swathed in cobwebs ... Ah!"

'Christian Weber turned a cold look to those present, who, stooping in a circle, their eyes popping out of their heads, listened. I heard him murmur: "Horrible! Horrible!" Then he resumed.

'"Can you see him?"

'"I can see him."

'"And the spider. Is it big?"

'"Oh! Master, never ... never have I seen one so huge, neither on the banks of the Mocaris nor in the lowlands of

Konanama ... It is as big as my head!"

'There was a lengthy silence. All those present looked at each other, their faces livid, their hair standing on end. Christian Weber alone appeared calm. Having passed his hands several times over the brow of the negress, he began.

'"Agatha, tell us how death struck Sir Haverburch."

'"He was bathing in the pool of the stream ... The spider saw him from behind, his back naked. It was hungry, it had been fasting for a long time. It saw him, his arms on the water. Suddenly, it dashed out, as quick as lightning, and placed its claws around the Commodore's neck, and he shouted 'My God! My God!' It bit him and ran off. Sir Haverburch collapsed into the water and died. Then the spider came back and surrounded him with its web, and it swam gently, gently as far as the bottom of the cave. It pulled the thread. Now it's completely black."

'The doctor turned towards me, no longer afraid. He said: "Is it true, Hans, that the Commodore went for a bathe?"

'"Yes, cousin."

'"At what time?"

'"At four o'clock."

'"At four o'clock. It was very hot, wasn't it?"

'"Ah yes!"

'"That's it!" he said, beating his brow. "The monster could come out without fear!"

'He uttered some unintelligible words, then, looking at the mountain folk.

'"My friends!" he exclaimed. "That's where this mass of debris comes from ... the body, the skeletons which frightened the bathers ... that's what has ruined you all ... It's a crab spider—God knows where it came from—but it's there ... hiding in its web ... and on the lookout for its prey from the bottom of the cave! Who can tell the number of its victims?'

'Then, filled with a sort of rage he left, shouting: "Faggots! faggots!"

'All the woodcutters followed him in the utmost confusion. Ten minutes later, two big coaches laden with faggots slowly climbed the hill. A long procession of woodcutters, backs bent, axes over their shoulders, followed them into the middle of

the dark night. My tutor and I walked in front, holding the horses by the bridle. The melancholy moon dimly lit up this funereal procession. From time to time the wheels creaked, then the carriages, raised up by the stony ruggedness of the path, fell back into the ruts with a heavy jolt.

'Drawing near the cave, our procession halted. The torches were lit and the crowd moved forward towards the abyss. The limpid water, flowing over the sand, reflected the bluish flames of the resinous torches, whose beams lit up the tops of the black pines leaning over the rock.

'"We must unload here," said the doctor. "Then we must block the entrance to the cave."

'And it was with a feeling of terror, that each one set to his task of carrying out their orders. The faggots fell from the top of the carts. Some stakes, placed below the opening of the spring, prevented the water from dragging them off.

'At about midnight the entrance to the cave was literally shut. The water whistling beneath, poured out right and left over the moss. The upper faggots were perfectly dry. Then Doctor Weber, seizing hold of a torch, set fire to them himself. The flames, rushing up from twig to twig, crackling angrily, soon leapt up to the sky, chasing before them clouds of smoke.

'It was a strange and wild spectacle, to see these huge woods with their quivering shadows lit up in this way.

'The cave disgorged a black smoke, which gradually increased until it was pouring out. All around waited the woodcutters, sombre and motionless, their eyes fixed on the entrance. And I myself, though fear made me tremble from head to toe, was unable to take my eyes away from it.

'We had already been waiting a quarter of an hour, and the doctor was beginning to get impatient, when a black object, with long hooked legs, suddenly appeared in the shadow and scuttled towards the opening.

'A general uproar resounded around the pile of faggots. The spider, chased by the fire, went back into its cave. Then, choked by the smoke, it returned to the charge and rushed to the middle of the flames. Its long hairy legs caught the flames and shrivelled up. It was as big as my head and a violet crimson;

I can only describe it as a bladder full of blood—the blood of Sir Thomas Haverburch!

'One of the woodcutters, afraid of seeing it cross the fire, threw his axe at it, and hit it so well that its blood for a moment covered all the fire around it. But then the flames burned up more fiercely above and consumed the horrible insect.'

'Such, Maître Frantz, is the strange event that destroyed the fine reputation that the waters of Spinbronn previously enjoyed. I can assure you of the scrupulous accuracy of my account. But as far as explaining it to you, that would be impossible. However, it is not absurd to imagine that insects, subjected to the raised temperature of certain spring waters, which provide for them the same conditions of existence and development as the scorching climates of Africa and South America, can reach incredible sizes. Dr Weber was of the opinion that the spider must have escaped from someone's collection and found the hot cave before it was killed by the cold climate.

'Be that as it may, my tutor, thinking that it would be impossible after this event to revive the waters of Spinbronn, resold Hâselnoss's house, and returned to South America with his negress and his insect collections. I was sent to boarding school in Strasbourg, where I stayed till 1809.

'The chief political events of the era at this time absorbed the attention of Germany and France and the facts that I have just related to you went completely unnoticed.

'But nobody drinks the waters of Spinbronn even to this day.'

Interim Report

by

ROGER PARKES

I warn you now, this story is not for those who are easily upset, for it is probably the grimmest tale in the book.

Roger Parkes has only appeared once before in a horror anthology and this story has never appeared before. Parkes, before taking up full time writing, has been a livestock feed adviser, cinema manager, farm manager, shepherd and bartender. He was also a crime reporter and foreign correspondent with Beaverbrook Newspapers, and later a story editor with the BBC TV Drama Department.

As well as editing such notable series as Out of the Unknown, *Roger Parkes has contributed scripts to other fantastic series like* Doomwatch *and* The Prisoner. *He has also written four novels, which have been sold in four countries to date.*

'Interim Report' is the result of a script Roger produced for the TV series Crown Court. *That particular programme he scripted was considered definitely unsuitable for children; this story is even more so. Don't forget, you have been warned.*

This report consists principally of an edited transcript of tapes recorded during five interviews with Mrs Joan Spiteri. Mrs Spiteri is a reasonably articulate woman of thirty and her thinking, having regard to her circumstances, is surprisingly well-collected. Accordingly, it is felt that these transcripts may suffice as exposition

I'm sorry. You'd think I'd be used to talking about it by now. All the others I've seen—doctors, social workers, specialists ...

Suppose you just start at the beginning, Mrs Spiteri.

Yes. But then—well, a nightmare like ours ... You could say it started with the voices, of course, but it really began before that.

With the birth of your twins perhaps?

What? Oh, no. Of course that wasn't an easy time. The shock of twins and then the, whatsit, post-natal depressions afterwards and so on. But they were me—my worries, you understand. Nothing to do with the—the other thing. In fact, for their first four years, Peter and Lynn were fine. Lovely. The usual thrush and chills and teething, of course. Baby things.. And of course the tower flat we were stuck in then didn't help, what with all the vandalism and noise ... At the time, along with the depressions—well of course it *seemed* bad. But, dear God, if only I'd known ...

Mrs Spiteri, why are you crying?

I'm sorry.

Please. There's nothing wrong with tears.

It's just that ...

Yes?

You see, it was only after we left the flat and moved out to that—that place ...

To Stone Gables?

It seemed so perfect at first. Away from all the noise and pollution of the town, and with a little bit of a garden for them to play in. Didn't matter the rent was far more than we could afford and we had to spend so much doing the place up. Just to be there after those flats. But ...

Yes?

That's where it was, you see. The—the evil. The ... I'm sorry.

Would it help if I asked questions?

No, please. It's just that I get, you know, awkward. After all, it's not something you can talk about with people like—well, like neighbours. And as for family, you see, there was only my mother really, and she died years ago before my marriage.

There's your husband.

What? Oh, you mean to talk to. Yes. And of course, with the

twins, we're so much closer. Wonderful family people, the Maltese, you know. Joe's a very devoted father. Well you can see that—the way he's stood by us through it all. Roman Catholic, of course. Very orthodox.

And you?

Me? Church of England. Of course Joe wants me to change, and I can see there's a lot to be said for confession and so on. But ...

You have a need for that, Mrs Spiteri? To confess?

What? Why should I? I don't know what you mean. After all ...

Yes?

Nothing. You see, it wasn't me. No matter what we thought at one time—the doctor and everyone—in the end we knew it wasn't me.

You are quite sure of that?

Of course! It was the cottage. Stone Gables. That ghastly, that evil place. Before that, they—the twins—they were lovely. Nothing awkward or difficult about them. Peter was always the brighter, of course. Cut his teeth first, walked first, talked first. Linda—well, she'd follow his lead. As you'd expect of the girl. But they were perfect. Ideal ...

Were they?

Yes! I've just said so. They were fine. Why not? Ideal. Can't you see, compared with later, anything would be ideal! Anything ...

Mrs Spiteri, you told me last time that it was a shock to give birth to twins.

Not that I regretted having two. Not for a moment. But then, when they're your first and you're still bright green about baby care ... But there's no doubt, for all the extra work and worry—everything in duplicate, like—there's no doubt they do help each other later on. Very quick to mature, you might say.

Precocious?

Don't get me wrong. They were absolutely sweet until ... But there's this sort of awareness. It's like—well, you know how people go on about the 'strangeness' of twins.

Their mutual affinity?

Always very close. Always. Until—well, it got into Peter first. Listless and fretful. Then Linda, too. Sudden tempers. Fly at anyone or anything for no reason. And restless at night—screaming over nothing, tearing at the wallpaper. And so rude if you crossed them. Quite sudden, it was. And from being such an amiable little couple.

And when was this?

More or less as soon as we moved into Stone Gables. Well naturally. A phase, that's what the health visitor told me. It'll pass, she said. Mind you, at first I was sure it was lead poisoning. Had the water tested and so on. Had them on an iron tonic, too, against anaemia. Vitamin pills—everything.

All extremely distressing for you—having to cope.

That's what the health visitor reckoned. She even had the welfare people round to check on me. I suppose she thought there was a danger I might, you know, injure them.

And was there such a danger?

No! Never. I love my children. They're my—my whole life. Of course I used to get upset. I'd punish them with a smack for such as the rudeness. In those early days I would—poor wee souls. But I was never so tired and upset that I'd lose control. Anyway, it was only a month or so before they changed again—before the talking started. I'd taken them to Dr Summers, our local G.P., a couple of times already by then, but he said I'd just have to try and ride it out till the moods passed. And at first, when they quietened down at nights, I thought he was right. Then one night I woke up and I heard Peter talking. Just quietly, you know, just like sleep-talking. The same the next two nights. And then, on the fourth night, I heard little Lindy answering him. Of course I called out to them to be quiet and go to sleep, and then I went fussing in to hush them. They stopped when I came in, but—creepy as anything, it was—you see, when I took a look, I found they were both lying there sound asleep. A couple of nights later they were both at it again, both chattering away, then silence the moment I went in. Of course then I thought they were playing me up—pretending, you know. But when I tried to wake little Pete, I found he was out to the world. Had a terrible job to rouse him.

What did your husband make of all this?

Of course, Joe's a man who needs his sleep. Well, naturally, working like he was: all that weekend overtime and then evening classes to try and get a qualification.

So you didn't tell him?

Eventually I did, when they'd been at it several weeks. Not that they'd talk every night. And sometimes not for very long. Other times, of course, they'd chatter on half the night—laughing, arguing—a right carry on.

What sort of things were they saying?

What? You know, I suppose it was because I was still more worried about their moods in the daytime, but at that stage I never thought to listen.

And your husband?

Joe sent me back to Dr Summers for another dose of the don't-worries.

The doctor told you not to worry about their sleep-talking?

That and tranquillisers. Said to give them a half Somnal each last thing at nights to stop the nightmares. Of course I tried to explain they weren't like nightmares. But it's—well, when there are a dozen other mothers waiting outside and.... Anyway, I tried the Somnals, but they only made them worse in the mornings and no effect on the talking.

The mornings?

The more they'd talk of a night, the worse they'd be at waking. Worn out and pale and grumpy every morning. As though they were in for some terrible illness. And you'd know from their mood first thing that was how they'd be for the rest of the day. Irritable, squabbling or—or—or else just, you know, sitting there sucking their thumbs like a couple of sickly little ... my babes—changed—wasting away to—to ...

Mrs Spiteri, you've said your husband backed you up.

Yes. Yes, he did. I mean, look what he's given up for us. All the sacrifices....

Yet you said in those early days you were the one who had to cope.

Mind you, after Dr Summers had said it must be me who

was, you know, causing it all—after that, Joe took some time off from work. It was then that we really got started on seeing all the specialists ...

Dr Summers? I'm sorry to interrupt, but Dr Summers said it was you causing it?

Yes. Well, why not? I mean, at the time, I thought so, too. I—I prayed it was me. All their daytime moods and the carry-on at night—if it was all simply because of my own anxieties, well wonderful. Cure me and we'd all be right again.... So then Dr Summers switched *me* on to the tranquillisers. I started knocking myself out each night and didn't hear the twins talking any more. Which wasn't really any help because I knew they were still at it.

How?

Well, from the way they were getting worse in the daytime. Nothing but this aimless grizzling the whole time. And the only way to quiet them was to plonk them in front of the telly the whole day. Of course that—when Joe took his week off from work—that was the first thing he wanted to stop. Cut out the telly, he said; stop them getting so dependent on it. Mark you, it wasn't more than a couple of days before he had it switched on again.

Because he couldn't manage the twins?

Yes. And chasing up Dr Summers for an appointment with a child specialist, too. You see, he'd heard them at night by then, and it had scared him. So first off it was Dr Falk. Joe got off work to take us to him for the first appointment, but all that happened was a lot of questions and then we're told to take the twins up to the Paediatric Unit, Great Charles Street. Of course Joe couldn't get off work all the time, so I had to take them up to London for the tests. Fight them up, I should say. They hated anything like that, you see. Any sort of disturbance —any upset....

And the results of the tests?

Ah. I mean, I don't suppose you've ever experienced anything like that, but believe me, it's a treadmill. Trail off to Falk again, only to hear the results aren't yet in or assessed or whatever. Back a week later, and he says they're through but inconclusive and he's referring the case to a child psychologist. There's

another long wait and with the kids worse every day. And when we do get to see this psychologist ...

Mr Hartman?

That's him. And he says more tests. Each time it's a whole day of travelling, each time hours of waiting around, trying to keep them quiet, cleaning them up when they mess ... Oh, dear God. And after another month or so, this Hartman says it *could* be a form of autism and since there's no special clinic anywhere near us, the only possibility is to—to send them away ... Certify them's what he meant. Lock them up. My babes! Shut away in a—a place for the m-m-mentally subnormal!

Now then, where did we get to last time, Mrs Spiteri?

All right for you, isn't it. Sitting there like—like a judge. Nodding, prodding, analysing, but never saying anything. Why can't you show you understand? Show you care!

I have to remain objective, Mrs Spiteri.

Mrs Spiteri! There, you see! My name's Joan. Joan! What's wrong? Scared, are you? Scared I'll contaminate you maybe? Or bewitch you? Put the influence on you?

Do try not to get excited. Please.

I—I—I'm sorry ... Ridiculous of me.

Here, take this. It'll help you relax.

Thank you. Can't think what came over me. Stupid. So Sorry.

You used the words contaminate, influence, bewitch.

Please, I didn't mean it. Just stupid ...

Really? Might you not have used those words because of what's happened to your children? Because you blame yourself?

No! How could I be to blame? Don't you see, for that to be possible, Joe and I—we'd have had to imagine it all. Granted we may not be the most perfect parents ever, but we're not mad. I mean, things like that, you just couldn't imagine. Never.

What I meant was that maybe you want to blame yourself That you need to transfer your guilt ...

Guilt? What guilt? Answer me, please. What guilt?

The guilt you feel over your marriage perhaps?

You—you mean all the rows? All that nonsense about Joe only marrying me so as to be able to stay on here in England? It's not true, you know. I only used to say that to.... Well, it's the way he'd always assume I'm at fault. Any little thing like the H.P. payments, the inflation—even the trouble with the twins—it always had to be me. Mind you, I'm not denying I've had my faults. Take the business of sending Pete and Lynn away.

To the special hospital?

I mean, how *could* I? Certify them? Lock them away in a—an institute? They were my babes—my whole life....

But if they were in need of treatment, Mrs Spiteri.

Well, I know, yes. But then, to send them away.... Anyway, Joe agreed with me on that. Absolutely. What he wanted was to get his mother or one of his sisters over to help out. But of course Malta—all that way. The expense. So then we had this idea of trying the Welfare for one of these home helps.

Yes?

No way. You'd have thought we were asking for paid holidays in Bermuda. I don't know, they call it a welfare state, charge you all those contributions and that, but when you need help—really need it.... So after that, Joe got on to the Maltese Community people in London, and they sent this pompous old man down to see us. Oh, he meant well—I can see that now—but I'm afraid at the time I took very much against him. His attitude, you know. As though I was the foreigner and, well, suspect. Most of the time he'd speak to Joe in Maltese—so as to exclude me, you know. But at least he cared; in fact, he stayed right through to the late evening so as to hear Pete and Lynn talking. Afterwards, Joe didn't want to say anything about him—seemed almost embarrassed in a way. And then a couple of evenings later, the old chap turned up again, this time with a priest.

Also Maltese?

Yes. Of course I wanted to know what's going on, what's the idea, and next thing they're telling me my babes are—that they're possessed! Some sort of—of—of demon's got into them! Naturally, I just went wild at that. I suppose it must have been the secret fear I already had of it. But—well, I just went all to

pieces. The whole idea that something was—was polluting my babies... I mean, lead, exhaust fumes, even the telly—anything rather than some dead spirit! *Anything*.... Joe didn't argue, not in front of them. He just apologized and asked them to leave. Then he... Well, of course it was wrong of me to go on like that—humiliate him in front of his own people like that. Very wrong. I deserved....

What, Mrs Spiteri?

It's not important.

Did he assault you? Beat you?

It's no more than any Maltese husband would have done under the circumstances. And besides, Joe—well, he was sorry afterwards. Extremely sorry. In fact, it was because of that as much as anything that he packed in his job so as to stay home and help me with the twins. I didn't ask him to, you understand. In fact, I was worried about how we'd manage. But he reckoned, what with the dole money and that, we'd be all right for a while at least.

Did he say anything more to you about the twins being possessed?

No, never a word. Mind you, he didn't need to. I mean, once they'd got me on to the idea—well ... Also, until Joe left his job, I'd always been too worn out at night really to listen to what they were saying.

What Peter and Linda were saying?

Except it wasn't them speaking. Never. Oh, it was their mouths and tongues. But not them. Not when you listened to their actual words and—and the way they ... I mean, you have to understand by then they'd got like a couple of zombies by day—never speaking or responding to anything, blank and empty. And then at night.... Well, after a while I couldn't deny it any longer. They—they were right.

The Maltese people?

Every night, two—two alien creatures were creeping into my babes and using their perfect little bodies, their brains and tongues as—as—as a means of life....

How are you feeling today?

Much better. Much. I think I can do without the pills today, thank you.

That's good.

You see, I've been thinking. It's all very clear now. I've got it all worked out. All clear in my mind.

Fine. Now then, you were at the point where....

Where I'd at last faced the truth. Where I'd stopped trying to blame it on me or the lead or autism or the telly or anything like that. I knew at last.... Not that I was any better for knowing. More helpless than ever in fact. I'd listen to them—those little voices saying those awful things—and I'd want to shout: 'No, Peter, don't talk like that. It's naughty to say those things. Little children shouldn't think like that!' But I couldn't because now I knew it wasn't them talking. I had no more control, no authority, no influence. They weren't our children any more. Not their minds. Only their bodies were ours for us to clothe and feed and clean during the day so that at night 'they'—whoever they were—could come and talk and laugh and have life.

And what sort of things did they talk about?

Oh, all manner of things. You could never tell. Peter's had a definite streak of violence in him—always on about fighting and weapons and bombings and so on.

Not unusual in a little boy.

Ah, but these were the very latest weapons and fighting. The —the brutalities in Northern Ireland or else the Arab terrorists. Those sort of things. Things way beyond him. Things no child of four could possibly have understood.

And Linda?

Hers was much more feminine, of course. The complete tart, you could say. Disgustingly promiscuous at times. Some of the things she came out with—that that creature made her say—you wanted to take hold and wallop her.

But you never did that?

Of course not! How—I mean, how *could* I after I knew it wasn't her speaking? Neither of them. It would have been wicked to punish them for—for words that weren't theirs. They weren't responsible. Poor little souls ... Of course, I did try to—to communicate with these two 'others'. Not Joe. He

wouldn't have it. Didn't like it at all. Wanted to stop me at first. In the end he let me move a mattress into the nursery with them, though. I'd lie there very quietly and, when they started, I'd try to answer and get through to them.

And?

Nothing. They could hear me. I was certain of that. But they ignored me. They had this power, you see. This power of existing beyond our—well, our world.

How do you mean?

Well, for instance, we tried moving Peter down to sleep in the sitting-room so as to get them apart. But they—they still went on talking to each other just like they were still in the same room. The same room! I—I—I mean, how can you meet a power like that? Reach it?

So then?

Of course we realized the cottage must be behind it. After all, it had all started when we moved into Stone Gables—first their moods and then soon the talking. Whatever they were—spirits or whatever—they must have been there in the place. An old building presumably with some tragic past.

But you say they talked about modern events—Ulster and the Arabs.

So? They also talked about space probes, but that doesn't make them Martians. Well, does it? Of course it was Stone Gables. So then of course we knew we had to move out and as quickly as possible. After all, once we knew—understood what was going on—well every night in that place was a worse horror. But of course finding somewhere else was a nightmare in itself, what with Joe out of work and a foreigner and no security. In the end we had to settle for a caravan on one of those sites out near Slough. It took every penny of our savings for the down payment. Everything and more. But it was somewhere to go—to get the twins away to.

And what happened?

It was terrible. The move upset them no end. They were in a fearful state.

But did the night voices stop?

That's who I mean. The twins—they hardly knew we'd moved. I told you, during the day they were like a couple of

zombies. Withdrawn, silent. The day of the move we simply packed them off, set up the telly in the caravan and sat them down in front of it. Hardly a blink out of them. But, God help us, that night you'd have thought the end of the world had come. Swearing and shouting and blaspheming. Terrible. Took them the better part of a week before they quietened down.

So the voices—the possessors—they didn't stay behind in Stone Gables?

Does a leech stay in its swamp when it's found a host? Oh, no. They'd got into my children by then and they weren't going to leave hold that easily.

So what then?

Everything we could think of. Joe's priest was first of course ... Robes, incense, chanting away in Latin—the full exorcism ritual. But nothing—no good. They ignored him the way they did me. Went silent and sulky for a few hours, then came back as strong as ever. The same with all those spirit mediums. Oh, yes, we tried them, too. Of course we tried them. You think we just went useless like the twins? Is that what you think? That we just gave in to it? Well, you're wrong. Quite wrong. We tried—tried everything times over. Over and over and over. That's—don't you see, that's how I finally succeeded. Through perseverance. Through the love I have for my two babies. Through love, Mr Bloody Whatsyourname! Love and caring. Things you don't know about. Heart and trust and a mother's love and—and ...

What did you do, Mrs Spiteri?

Cured them, that's what! I—I—I worked it out. Sleep time—right? That was the only time they could get in—could talk and live through my babes. So I—I stopped them sleeping. Simple as that. Of course, I knew Joe would worry, might try and interfere. So one night I dosed him up with my sleeping-pills, waited till he was off and then went and woke the twins. I got them up and dressed and then—well, quite simply, I made sure they didn't sleep. I'd thought it out, you see—reckoned if I could, like, starve them out, stop them living through the twins, even for just one night, then there was a chance they'd be forced to go somewhere else. It was at night, after all. They could only come in at night. In their sleep. So I saw it was the

obvious way to try and get them out. Obvious!

So you kept the twins awake?

As long as I could, yes. Hours it was. Hours and hours. On and on. Of course, it wasn't easy. They kept trying to get in—trying to lull them off. Linda's was the worst. I had to keep shaking the poor wee thing—shouting to her. The pep pills I'd got did help them a bit, but even they wore off. I had to give them another dose after an hour or so, and then a double dose when that failed. And even with the pills I had to keep shaking them and—and—and shouting to them all the time. On and on. And then—well, it was day and Joe woke up and came and stopped me. And—and—and it was all right. They were cured. Not a murmur. Both off into this lovely deep, silent sleep. Not a sound. Wonderful.

And then?

What? Well, I was worn out of course. You can imagine. Dropping. I suppose I must have had this sort of, you know, collapse. The next thing I remember, I was in here in this little room with the flowers and the sunlight and the silence. I know it's not near Slough because I can't hear the jumboes or the motorway or anything. I expect Joe will bring the twins to see me soon. When I'm a bit better. But then, now I know they're all right, I'm not so worried. After all, I've got the telly for company and it's nice and quiet and—and there's you, coming in to chat with me like this. I don't even mind that solemn old way you have of staring at me. Not really. Knowing my babes are cured and I'll be seeing them soon....

It is as yet too early to assess how soon the patient will be ready to cope with abreaction and the full shock of reality. In a sense, Mrs Spiteri has already made a substantial adjustment within the confines of her fantasy world. But we are still a long way from establishing a reliable state of transference, and I would respectfully submit to Your Lordship that in the interim she will remain totally unfit to give evidence in the court.

Regarding the supposed 'possession': This form of infant withdrawal is not unknown to child psychologists. Essenti-

ally it is a case of the child's rejecting the unwholesome stress realities of the home with its aura of anxieties, contradictions and parental antagonisms—rejecting this in favour of the more reassuring world of television. In the instance of the Spiteri twins, it would seem probable that they were partially mnemonic—that is, possessed of compulsive faculties of memory. They were absorbing a mass of random information from the media during the day; they had a need to communicate this information; this need resulted in the phenomenon of their sleep-talking.

That the Spiteris should, through the inadequacies of an over-strained welfare service, have been driven to such extremes of destitution, despair and superstition is surely tragedy enough. That the mother should additionally have to face prosecution for the murder of the two children to whom she was so obsessively devoted would seem, I would respectfully submit, brutally to compound her suffering.

TERROR BY GASLIGHT

EDITED BY HUGH LAMB

The dark nights of a hundred years ago gave tortured birth to this unique collection of horrifying tales. From the flickering gaslight came forth such monsters of the macabre as the Weird Woman with the Dead Eyes, the Bleeding Spectre and the Vengeful Wife.

So enter if you dare The House of Strange Stories, gaze on The Basilisk, learn the secret of the Beckoning Hand and feel the chill stare of The Invisible Eye.

CORONET BOOKS

VICTORIAN TALES OF TERROR

EDITED BY HUGH LAMB

From the gaslit nights of the age of Jack the Ripper comes this volume of long-buried horror, a selection of terrifying tales from the pens of Charles Dickens, J. Sheridan le Fanu, Guy de Maupassant, Mrs. Molesworth and many others.

Turn the pages of this book and find out what dreadful horror lies behind 'The Mask', make the acquaintance of 'The Dead Man of Varley Grange', follow the terrifying progress of 'The Shadow in the Moonlight', meet 'The Mother of Monsters' and discover what was 'The Last of Squire Ennismore'.

CORONET BOOKS

MORE HORROR FROM CORONET BOOKS

	HUGH LAMB	
☐ 20810 4	A Wave of Fear	80p
☐ 20817 1	Victorian Tales of Terror	80p
☐ 21303 5	Terror By Gaslight	70p
	JOAN KAHN	
☐ 20138 X	Some Things Strange and Sinister	60p
☐ 20146 0	Some Things Dark and Dangerous	70p
☐ 20005 7	Some Things Fierce and Fatal	80p
	ROBERT MARASCO	
☐ 18989 4	Burnt Offerings	70p
	PETER UNDERWOOD	
☐ 20813 9	The Vampire's Bedside Companion	£1.00

All these books are available at your local bookshop or newsagent, or can be ordered direct from the publisher. Just tick the titles you want and fill in the form below.
Prices and availability subject to change without notice.

CORONET BOOKS, P.O. Box 11, Falmouth, Cornwall.
Please send cheque or postal order, and allow the following for postage and packing:
U.K. – One book 22p plus 10p per copy for each additional book ordered, up to a maximum of 82p.

B.F.P.O. and EIRE – 22p for the first book plus 10p per copy for the next 6 books, thereafter 4p per book.

OTHER OVERSEAS CUSTOMERS – 30p for the first book and 10p per copy for each additional book.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

The rats and the brother's revenge . . .

The withered arm from beyond the grave . . .

The monster spider in the health resort . . .

The things beneath the Sargasso Sea . . .

The possessed children and the mother's cure

The witching hour has struck, the pit has opened at your feet and you can now try for yourself THE TASTE OF FEAR in this baker's dozen of chillers old and new from masters of the macabre. But beware — that ghastly scream you hear just might not be your own!

CORONET BOOKS/HODDER AND STOUGHTON

Fiction : Horror

ISBN 0 340 22005 8

UNITED KINGDOM	85p
AUSTRALIA	$2.75*
NEW ZEALAND	$2.75
CANADA	$2.50

*recommended but not obligatory